CONTROL THROUGH 'PERSONAL GROWTH'

A critical qualitative case study of an educational organization focusing on self-development and authenticity

by

Donika Krasniqi & Maria Strelkova

May 2019

Master's program in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

Supervisor: Monika Müller
Examiner: Roland Paulsen

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

ABSTRACT

Title:	Control Through 'Personal Growth' - A critical qualitative case study of an educational organization focusing on self-development and authenticity
University:	Lund University School of Economics and Management
Course:	BUSN49 - Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge and Change
Authors:	Donika Krasniqi & Maria Strelkova
Supervisor:	Monika Müller
Thesis purpose:	The following research paper aims to contribute to the concept of normative control by exploring employee perceptions of culture management in an educational organization with a focus on personal growth
Methodology:	This study is conducted from a critical studies perspective using an interpretative approach. The empirical data is collected through a case study of the educational organization Brainwell and involves eleven semi-structured interviews and an analysis of publicly available company materials
Findings:	The findings demonstrate the presence of normative and neo-normative control in an educational organization with a focus on personal growth. Through personal growth concepts, private life aspects of employees are entered and shaped
Keywords:	Culture management, normative control, neo-normative-control, personal growth, authenticity

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

Culture management and normative control are central topics in critical organizational research (Alvesson, 1985; Willmott, 1993). The concept of culture management was introduced to the field of organization and management in the late 1970s and began to attract significant scholarly attention since the early 1980s (Glynn, Giorgi & Lockwood, 2013). Based on insights from sociology and anthropology, organizational scientists argued that organizations have different cultures, meaning sets of shared values, beliefs, and norms that determine attitudes and actions of organizational members (Schein, 1985; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Kanter, 1984; Kanter, 1990). Researchers suggested that corporate culture could significantly impact business success, and therefore, superior corporate cultures could be used as a resource to influence employee engagement, performance, and create a competitive advantage (Glynn, Giorgi & Lockwood, 2013). Authors such as Davis (1984), Ouchi (1981) and Waterman (1988) further suggest that by strengthening organizational culture, meaning building strong corporate cultures, a competitive advantage in the form of higher employee commitment and organizational performance is achieved. Following that, critical management studies, such as that conducted by Willmott and Knights (1987), started to examine the cultural approach to organization studies to provide a radically new direction of analysis.

Accordingly, Willmott (1993) stated that, when corporate cultures are strengthened, organizational members are asked to commit themselves to organizational values and products. He further argues that promoting this commitment also encourages employees to act responsibly in order to maintain a relationship between securing their employment and their contribution to the company's competitiveness. As a result, supporters of strong organizational cultures understand by 'strength' of culture the absence of competing values within an organization, leading to a normative work environment (Willmott, 1993).

Culture management has been studied and explored by critical management studies to a great extent during the last thirty years. Researchers such as Willmott (1993) and Kunda (1992) have been seen as main contributors in this research field in the 1990s by presenting normative control mechanisms embedded in organizational culture management approaches. While culture management is primarily seen as a managerial tool (Ouchi, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982), creating normative work environments within culture management practices is acknowledged as a control mechanism (Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Control in this context is understood as any process in which a person or group of persons affects and influences the behavior of another person or group (Tannenbaum, 1986).

Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011) introduced new perspectives and insights on culture management and normative control, leading to a revival of interest to this research field. They presented a new emergent approach of normative control, which allows employee management through the expression of fun, individuality, authenticity and encouragement of 'being yourself' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; 2011). We were interested in this new insight on normative control in cultural management studies and its impact on employees, and whether this approach can only be applied in tightly controlled work environments of call centers, which Fleming and Sturdy used as their research context (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Besides that, the interest for this study was triggered by our curiosity about the increasing popularity of modern organizational discourses, such as discourses of well-being, mindfulness and purposefulness (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Marshak & Grant, 2008).While in the research of Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), neo-normative control was found to distract organizational members from a boring environment and strict control mechanisms; we were interested in studying culture management in a knowledge-intensive organization where employees are experts in their respective fields. An educational organization with a focus on authenticity and personal development – or 'personal growth' – served as an exemplary platform for our interest for the research study. With that, the company's focus lies on providing products for personal development in areas of body, mind, and spirit. Wikipedia, the popular online encyclopedia, describes personal development or personal growth, covering *"activities that improve awareness and identity, develop talents and potential, build human capital and facilitate employability, enhance the quality of life and contribute to the realization of dreams and aspirations"* (En.wikipedia.org, 2019).

1.1   Research purpose and questions

The present research study aims to explore the effects of culture management and normative control by analyzing how employees perceive culture management in an educational organization which has a focus on authenticity and personal growth as its educational goal. We find it essential and relevant to investigate the role of culture management and normative control in this type of organization since it serves a different organizational environment and nature of work. Unlike in the case of Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), where the work environment is described as highly routinized and controlling, the work environment in our research study can be described as knowledge-intensive, innovative, purpose-driven and flexible. Furthermore, since academic research reflecting on employees' experiences is still lacking our aim is to contribute with employee perspectives in this

field of culture management and normative control. This study aims to demonstrate diverse perspectives and experiences of employees with different organizational positions and length of employment. The guiding research question for this study is:

How do employees experience culture management in an educational organization with a focus on personal growth?

1.2   Structure of the thesis

The first chapter of this thesis introduces our theoretical framework, where the concepts of organizational culture, culture management, and organizational control mechanisms are discussed. This is followed by the explanation of the chosen methods, providing the research context and an overview of applied research design, data collection and data analysis approaches, as well as credibility and trustworthiness. Further, we continue with the findings of our empirical data and analysis of the findings. In the discussion, we consider the appliance of the theoretical background to our findings. Finally, in the concluding chapter, we present the contribution of our study to academia, revise limitations as well as provide suggestions for future research and provide some practical implications.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter provides a theoretical background with an understanding of the theoretical foundations relevant to our study. These foundations are organizational culture, culture management, and organizational control mechanisms, including normative and neo-normative control.

2.1 Organizational culture

Currently, there are nearly a quarter of a billion hits on Google for a search on the term 'organizational culture', and close to three million academic articles on Google Scholar, without taking into account related terms such as 'corporate culture' or 'organizational environment'. The popularity of this term started gaining rise at the beginning of the 1980s with the development of interest in the relation of business success and organizational work environments (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Organizational culture is an abstract and complex socially constructed phenomenon that can be interpreted in various ways (Hatch, 2018; Luscher, Lewis & Ingram, 2006; Schein, 2010). For instance, Alvesson (2013, p.3) admits that culture is *"a tricky concept as it is easily used to cover everything and consequently nothing"*. However, he delves into this concept and admits that organizational culture is *"significant as a way of understanding organizational life in all its richness and variations"* (Alvesson, 2013, p.2). Similarly, Schein (2010) advocates that if this abstract concept can be useful for our thinking, we need to increase our understanding of the organizational events that are mysterious. Thus, despite the ambiguity of understanding organizational cultures, its significance is commonly accepted. Despite the ambiguity, it is still crucial to use organizational culture concepts with a focus and direction on an interpretative depth (Alvesson, 2013). To provide a more nuanced understanding, we further review some of the interpretations and existing classifications of organizational culture.

A number of researchers define organizational culture as socially shared beliefs, assumptions and value systems. For example, Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) construe how people in a company think, feel, express themselves, value and act is guided by ideas, meanings and beliefs of a cultural (socially shared) nature. Similarly, Hislop, Helms and Bosua (2018, p.273) define organizational culture as *"the beliefs and behaviors shared by organizational members regarding what constitutes an appropriate way to think and act at work"*. These definitions reaffirm the

complexity of the meaning of organizational culture, that involves not only motives of behaviors and acts, but also the way of expressing these acts and behaviors. Addressing this complexity, many scholars view organizational culture through a set of layers, or webs (Alvesson, 2013; Ostroff, Kinicki & Muhammad, 2003). For example, Schein (1985) proposed a culture model with the help of three integrative layers, namely: observable artefacts, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions. He argued that in order to interpret the observable symbolic artefacts of the first layer of the culture model, one needs to understand the deeper layers of culture, containing fundamental reasons, underlying assumptions and unconscious values (Schein, 2010).

Other researchers attempt to categorize and depict organizational culture by placing it in between the extremes of a continuum (Alvesson, 2013). Some of the examples of these continuums are: visible versus non-visible (Schein, 2010), explicit versus implicit aspects of the organizational culture (Ahearne, 2009) or strong versus weak cultures (Saffold, 1988). Whereas the former refers to the phenomenon of different layers of culture (Schein, 2010), the latter refers to the understanding of how pervasive these cultural beliefs are, and how strongly organizational members relate to them. To conclude this introduction, we provide the definition of organizational culture by Schein (2010, p.18), which we use for the purpose of our study:

> *"a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems".*

2.1.1 Organizational culture as expression: symbols and practices

The most noticeable level of the organizational culture is formed by the visible and perceivable processes and structures in the organizations, such as surface-level behaviors, a published list of values, company products, manners of communication, symbols, artefacts, practices, and traditions (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Schein, 1985; 2010). Similarly, other scholars suggest that rituals, stories, signs and symbols help to interpret the shared meanings, that are at the same time shaped by the experiences of organizational members (Frost, 1985; Geertz, 1973). In a likewise manner, Alvesson (2013) points out that the shared meanings in the organization are anchored and transmitted in a symbolic form. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) denote that these symbols and artefacts are easy to

remember; therefore, they help to depict the shared experiences. Trice and Beyer (1993) provide further elaboration on the visible artefacts of the organizational culture, categorizing them into symbolic objects (i.e. physical setting, objects, natural or created symbols), organizational language (i.e. specific for the organization slang, gestures, humor, metaphors etc.), narratives (i.e. shared stories), and practices (i.e. organizational rituals, ceremonies). Thus, hereafter talking about an organizational culture that is expressed through behaviors, processes, traditions and in other symbolic form, we see these expressions as a result of shared meaning within the organization.

Furthermore, the observable level of organizational culture can be correlated with expressed manifestations (Martin, 2002), or with the organizational discourses. The term 'organizational discourse' is usually understood as a set of practices and structures embodied through texts, way of speaking, visual representation or way to conduct oneself (Grant & Hardy, 2004). Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) discuss that organizational discourses help to reason and construct the social reality within the organization. The shaped and influenced interactions of social reality can, at the same time, shape and influence the experiences and behavior of organizational members in a variety of different settings (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Even though the level of manifested culture is seemingly superficial, it reflects underlying values and assumptions that help to reveal and understand the deeper levels of the culture (Alvesson, 2013). Along with that, Schein (2010) suggests that it is easier to shape the behaviors of employees through the observable level of organizational culture and organizational discourses due to their accessibility. Schultz (1995) suggests that the organizational culture shall be studied as an integrative perspective together with underlying levels of culture. As Schein (2010) also argues, that it is often both difficult to interpret organizational culture accurately without understanding the deeper beliefs and assumptions and dangerous to hastily infer it, because one's interpretation is inevitably projected through own feelings and reactions.

2.1.2 Organizational culture as lived experiences: values and underlying meanings

Schein (2010, p.14) admits that *"the most intriguing aspect of culture as a concept is that it points us to phenomena that are below the surface, that are powerful in their impact but invisible and to a considerable degree unconscious"*. According to the various degree of awareness about these phenomena, Schein (2010) distinguishes the second level of his model of culture as espoused beliefs and values (i.e. personal values, aspirations, rationalizations), and the third level as underlying

assumptions (i.e. taken for granted values and beliefs, unconscious experience). The latter level is seen as the most unconscious one determining and driving certain behaviors and forms of perceptions, thoughts and feelings of organizational members (Schein, 2010). In this subsection, we discuss the second and the third level of Schein's culture model, both of which are less observable and therefore require some level of awareness. Schein (2010) further demonstrates that the more unconscious and more taken for granted assumptions and beliefs become, the more difficult it is to shape them. Similarly, Bushe (2010) believes that once developed and integrated assumptions become a mental map that later unconsciously defines our sense-making. Even though the naturalization process of these assumptions transforms shared meanings to more unconscious and taken for granted assumptions, it is important to unfold the underlying assumptions in order to understand organizational culture as a whole (Schultz, 1995).

2.2   Culture management

In the 1980's term 'corporate culture' became a central topic in the field of organizational and management studies (Willmott, 1993). Among practitioners the idea of enhancing and strengthening the corporate culture was advertised by management experts, such as Peters and Waterman (1982), Willmott (1993), further confirmed and supported by other representatives and divisions such as total quality management (Crosby, 1984) and human resource management (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992). In accordance with Gagliardi (ed. 1990) and Turner (ed. 1989), the interest in using culture as a tool or means of competitive advantage was supplemented by growing scientific attention to symbolic dimensions of organizational life. A wide range of authors like Davis (1984), Deal and Kennedy (1982), Kanter (1984; 1990), Ouchi (1981) and Waterman (1988) argue that the process of strengthening corporate culture leads to an increase of organizational performance by ensuring greater flexibility and commitment among organizational employees. Willmott (1993) argues that productivity and quality improvements come from corporate cultures that systematically recognize and reward individuals for identifying their own purpose with the values that are designed and offered by the organization. Willmott (1993) further argues that the main purpose and guiding principle of corporate cultures is to win the 'hearts and minds' of employees, meaning to define not only their behavior but also their personal purpose by managing their thoughts and feelings. Related to this, Peter and Waterman (1982, p.17) state that strengthening corporate cultures, in other words, designing a strong corporate culture, is the key to securing *"unusual efforts by apparently ordinary*

employees". Moreover, they declare that organizational 'top performers' help to create a broad, constructive, shared culture and a coherent framework in which excited people seek appropriate adaptations. As a result, exceptional contributions are made by a vast number of people, requiring the ability to create a highly valued sense of purpose (Peter & Waterman, 1982).

As noted by Harvey (1989), in a broader context, corporate culture can be seen as a critical ideological element within a global reorganization of labor, capital and product markets, moving towards a contingent of fluid organizing philosophy of 'flexible accumulation'. Harvey (1989) argues that an essential component for moving towards more flexible structures, corporate cultures require and expect employees to internalize the company values of 'flexibility', 'quality' and 'value creation' in order to accept and value them as their own. Employees personal human judgement and discretionary powers are thereby fundamentally aligned with organizational work practices.

As corporate cultures are strengthened, employees are asked and encouraged to dedicate themselves to the company values and products as well as to evaluate their own values in these given terms (Wilmott, 1993). By fostering this form of dedication, employees are at the same time asked to 'recognize 'and 'take responsibility' for the relationship between the security of their employment and their overall contribution to the competitiveness of the company goods and services (Wilmott, 1993). This finds confirmation by Thompson and McHugh (1990), who argue that by adopting core corporate values, employees are encouraged to take their performance and benefits to the company as their responsibility.

Consequently, the advocates of corporate culture understand 'strength' of culture as the absence or lack of competing values to which employees' discretion may otherwise be 'misdirected' (Wilmott, 1993). Cultural strength is thus characterized by the proximity of the content orientation of the employees' determination to the normative framework established by the company's cultural engineers (Kunda, 2006). Through the careful design of corporate values, employees are invited and encouraged to create a 'love of product' or identical connection for creating their sense of purpose aligned to the organization (Wilmott, 1993). Accordingly, Foucault (1982, p. 781) claims that by this means employees are introduced and supported in becoming *"tied to their identity by conscience or self-knowledge"*. So, the new culture management attempts differ in degree from earlier progressive forms in its systematic and totalizing approach to the design and strengthening of the normative framework of work (Willmott, 1993). Moreover, corporate cultures are seen as being responsive to

value conflicts within modern capitalist organizations; these conflicts are interpreted as signs of cultural weakness, which, however, can be corrected by strong corporate cultures (Willmott, 1993).

2.2.1 Corporate culture and autonomy

As stated by Willmott (1993), corporate culture strives to maintain control by providing the impression of respecting the individuality of each organizational employee. Although corporate culture disguises itself as a 'therapy of freedom' that extends the practical autonomy of its employees, it identifies cultural values as a powerful, underutilized dominant medium (Willmott, 1993). Peters and Waterman (1982) elaborate further and argue that companies present themselves as having respect for the individual, stating they give people control over their destinies in the form of autonomy. Related to this, Willmott (1993) explains that corporate culture calls for employees to understand that identifying with the company values leads to receiving their autonomy. Orwell (1989) calls this 'double thinking' of corporate culture, as respect for individuals is equated with adhering to the values of the corporate culture which results in simultaneously confirming and denying the conditions of autonomy. Thus, autonomy is presented as a gift to the employees (Freire, 1972., in return for identifying with the company culture and company values. Challenging these company values would imply carrying out 'a crime against' the corporate culture (Willmott, 1993). By defining autonomy as obedience to the core values of corporate culture, the meaning and the imagined possibility of freedom are narrowly defined, according to Willmott (1990).

Consequently, the advocates of strengthening the corporate culture extend the promise and commitment of creating a normative environment in which employees enjoy their autonomy and a system that respects and truly promotes the self-determination of each individual (Willmott, 1993).

2.2.2 Corporate culture and authenticity

As introduced by Willmott (1993), culture management rhetoric continued with human relations emphasis on job-based autonomy. In terms of corporate values, however, the coercive message in this cultural management approach was clear: *"you either buy into their (organizational) norms, or you get out"* (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 77). Following Fleming and Sturdy (2011), management

commentators have noted a sort of dysfunction in these cultures and clan controls. One of the main factors contributing to this dysfunction was the fact that employees felt the force of identifying with the company and its customers, as well as the force of expressing certain feelings and beliefs (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Vallas, 2003). This dysfunctional and counterproductive approach of imposed value conformity has led to undermining innovation, creativity and initiative resulting in serious managerial concerns according to Foster and Kaplan (2001).

Resulting from that, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) identified a new culture management method applied by companies, namely normative control or control through authenticity. In this new management practice also called 'pop-management' companies put a strong emphasis on employees having the freedom of 'being [yourself] themselves', through fun, diversity, sexuality and authenticity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Fleming and Sturdy (2011) argue that companies with routinized and mechanized work tasks (e.g. call centers) encourage their employees to *"celebrate themselves and to display a commitment to who they are rather than the company itself"* (p. 186). With this approach, companies aim to provide employees with a company culture serving a sense of freedom; the freedom to 'just be yourself' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Furthermore, Houlihan (2002) argues that such approaches are often perceived to be more caring and less controlling but actually serve to distract individuals from the overall control mechanisms. In support of that, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) argue that employees rather experience the 'freedom to', meaning the sort of freedom to act and perform freely within the company's frame of freedom. More specifically, employees are not free from company controls, but they are instead provided with freedom around the organizational control practices (Fleming and Sturdy (2011). Nevertheless, the application of the 'just be yourself' culture management practice, predominantly in companies with routinized tasks, indeed enabled certain freedoms, possibly not available in the past, as stated by Fleming and Sturdy (2011).

2.3   Organizational control mechanisms

While culture management is widely integrated and more viewed as a managerial tool, the concept of neo-normative control to managing culture is viewed from a more critical perspective (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). The intention of applying these concepts lies on the purpose of creating objectives employees are expected to follow and commit when being employed (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). However, before addressing the concept of neo-normative control, it

is necessary to understand the definition of control, its source, and how it has been used in organizational settings.

Tannenbaum (1968, p. 5) describes control as *"any process in which a person or group of persons or organization of person determines, that is, institutionally affects, the behavior of another person, group, or organization"*. Etzioni (1975) identifies three different control mechanisms that organizations apply when seeking to achieve a compliant workforce. The first one, called coercive compliance, implies the implicit threat of physical sanctions for controlling the organizational participants, usually leading to suffering from a high degree of alienation. The second normative compliance constructs a strong sense of 'belonging' pervading all organizational levels, based on selective hiring processes and socialization of employees into a common value system or culture. Normative compliance is described by Etzioni (1975) as a system that uses shared values reinforced by symbols, rituals and slogans in order to encourage active compliance of organizational members. The key requirement of this approach lies on a basic set of values, shared by employees and their superiors and depends initially on the organizations' employee selection for ensuring like-minded people in the organization. This is followed by socializing and training employees with norms and values provided by the company as stated by Etzioni (1975). He further explains that in the third type of control, the remunerative one, organizational leaders maintain considerable control over followers or lower participants by manipulating material resources, either offer material rewards for good behavior or holding them back in order to encourage compliance. Finally, he concludes that organizations apply these control mechanisms for supporting their pre-defined goals and strategies.

Ouchi and Maguire (1975) make a further distinction and state that traditional forms of control are associated with more bureaucratic methods and ways of evaluating and constraining employees' performance through human resource policies. Nevertheless, these traditional control systems aim to achieve set company goals, but they also nurture to exercise resistance (Thurlow & Mills, 2009). When resistance occurs or when bureaucratic control methods fail, companies decide to apply new ways of control in the form of subtle practices and discourses seeking to promote employees' self-regulation and achieve less critical employee interpretations of company purpose and management approaches (Gabriel, 1999), which leads us back to the earlier mentioned concept of normative control.

2.3.1 Normative control

Normative control has been a dominant topic in organizational and critical management studies since the 1990s (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Etzioni argued back in 1975 that normative control is less applied and less common in professional organizational settings, as organizations rather tend to make use of remunerations. Researchers such as Alvesson and Robertson (2006) and Costas and Kärreman (2015) state that organizations tend not to rely on remunerative powers as the basis of compliance. For facilitating compliance, organizations rather make use of control elements leading to employee identity regulations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This is in alignment with Ouchi (1979), Alvesson (2000), and Alvesson and Robertson (2006) who state that normative control is often exercised when the bureaucratic control does not lead to the desired work behavior or as well as when bureaucratic control mechanisms reach their limits. Shared beliefs, values, meanings, and symbols get to be vital elements of control (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1992; Ray, 1986; Rosen, 1985).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 622) define normative control as *"regulating employees 'insides'- their feelings, identifications as well as their self-image"*. According to Kunda, normative control can be defined as *"the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions"* (1992, p. 11). Moreover, Etzioni (1975) and Williams (2013) argue that essential practices of normative control are careful hiring processes and culture-specific socializing activities resulting, according to Ouchi (1980), in a 'strong culture' or - more specific - a clan. In this clan, individuals are willing to engage in ceremonies and rituals supporting organizational success. The careful hiring process is synonymous with hiring the 'right people', meaning individuals who have the same or similar objectives as those of the company. Consequently, Ouchi (1980) argues that organizations have a focus especially on hiring young and inexperienced employees to guide and socialize them in the direction of organizational objectives - compensating the hired employees based on non-performance criteria. Alvesson (2004) refers to this phenomenon as 'social-integrative management' in which members are connected to the organization by communicating the 'greatness' and uniqueness of the organization resulting in building a strong community.

Also, Barley and Kunda (1992) indicate that normative control can evolve in organizational cultures in which organizational members engage in a strong commitment to the organization, to the extent that they see little difference between their own welfare and welfare of the organization. In

accordance with Barley and Kunda (1992), normative control is constructed to create a sense of shared beliefs, trust and unity. Moreover, Kunda (1992) express that this control mechanism operates with the help of organizational members regulating and influencing each other's reputation. Therefore, members aim to internalize attitudes and beliefs that are generally accepted among organizational members for the sake of their own reputation.

Research on normative control is based on critical management studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Willmott 1993) that question the ethicality related to the desirability of managerial control over values, beliefs, and opinions lived by organizational members (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Whyte (1956) further expresses that this kind of control mechanism is an advanced and manipulative sort of tyranny, applied by organizations. This leads to violating the privacy, dignity and freedom of organizational members (Etzioni, 1975; Kunda 1992).

2.3.2   Neo-normative control

Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011) present a further development of normative control, namely neo-normative control, which addressed the given limitations associated with normative control. These limitations are related to the rigidity of homogenous cultures and the cynicism they evoke among employees who distance themselves from the collective norm (Jermier, Slocum, Fry & Gaines, 1991). The emerging 'neo' form of normative control encourages employees to express their 'true selves' by breaking traditional work and non-work boundaries (Spicer, 2011). The concept of this control mechanism was first introduced by Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011) and is still very new; however, various researchers have already taken an empirical approach to the theory of neo-normative control. Empirical evidence shows that this emerging form of control is being used frequently more in organizations, from call centers in Australia (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) to technology firms in the United States (Ross, 2004) and knowledge-intensive firms worldwide (Liu, 2004), as well as consulting firms in the United Kingdom (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Particular significant and applied neo-normative control is in volatile and highly competitive markets that require a great degree of flexibility towards change and innovation (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Walker, 2011).

As stated by Müller (2017), drawing on Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), neo-normative control is an extension of culture management that is built on value-centered discourses addressing individuality, authenticity, or having fun as well as on embracing the unification of private life and

work life aspects. Employees are asked to 'be themselves' and to present their real personal identity rather than to show an identity normatively aligned to an organizationally established identity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009).

In contrast to normative control, which aims to achieve an alignment among employees and organizations, neo-normative control attempts to create an environment in which employees can be truly authentic in order to work as efficiently as possible (Pedersen, 2011). Pedersen (2011) further points out that authenticity carries the private and spontaneous self into the workplace, whereby employees' desires, interests as well as instincts, paradoxically, come to the service of organizational benefits. According to Bloom (2016), authenticity ironically reinforces the effectiveness of individuals and thus improves the employee and organizational performance. To be more specific, authenticity turns into an individual's own normative control (Cederström, 2011).

Another critical element of this apparent new freedom is having fun during working hours, turning the workplace into the 'best place to work' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Being 'playful' and having 'fun' at work is stimulated due to the belief that these aspects are affiliated with organizational loyalty and conformity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). That is justified with the attempt of creating a supportive and diverse environment to which employees get a feeling of belongingness (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Amabile and Kramer (2011) reveal that playfulness and fun have the power to engage and to attract employees in their work. In other words, the factor of fun is utilized for the purpose of the organization (Ross, 2004). Besides that, rather than looking and seeking for developed norms that have been developed within working groups (Ray, 1986), the goals of neo-normative control are related to non-working life aspects (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). According to Fleming and Sturdy (2009, p. 9), this leads to *"workers to love being in the company rather than love the company itself"*. Thus, neo-normative control aims in structuring the organizational workplace in different ways so that the traditional line of separating private life aspects and work life aspects (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) as well as the boundary between fun and work becomes blurry (Plester & Sayers, 2007).

Moreover, through neo-normative control, a degree of freedom could be presented in organizations to date (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Walker, 2011). On the one hand, neo-normative control gives the possibility of self-expression to organizational loyalty and conformity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Employees have the freedom to show their 'true self', as in their personal life and in return, the private self is used as a contribution to organizational benefits (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). On the other hand, employees also receive the freedom to self-manage their work and achieve a great degree of

enjoyment by increasing their productivity (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Bramming, Kristensen & Pedersen, 2010). Worth noting that neo-normative control is about self-management rather than 'self-actualization', meaning that the key difference with neo-normative control is, that it aims to enhance the enjoyment of the job via the freedom of identity and emotional expression surrounding the work performance rather than through it (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Self-actualization means realizing individual goals, dreams and desires (Maslow, 2009). However, self-management, on the contrary, implies that employees have the freedom to manage the achievement of their activities. If organizational members are capable of choosing and deciding the execution of their tasks, they are willing to contribute their selves in favor of the organization (Bramming, Kristensen & Pedersen, 2010).

As indicated above, neo-normative control functions can be seen as a cover to increase exploitation, whereby organizations provide and sell authenticity to blurry the boundary between work and private life (Lewis, 2003; Bloom & Cederström, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Walker, 2011). Therefore, some researchers, such as Lewis (2003), Bloom and Cederström (2009), Fleming and Sturdy (2009) and Walker (2011), argue that this control mechanism hinders individual freedom and thus, in no way can be associated with freedom *per se,* as freedom is only allowed to a certain degree.

Furthermore, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) describe this extension of normative control as a technique in which members' attention is drawn away from the fact that organizational control is being performed on them. To be more specific, neo-normative control can be seen as a factor of distraction, deriving attention away from the reality that the behaviors, norms, opinions, and outputs of employees are controlled and regulated (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Focusing and putting a great degree of emphasis on the same norms and values seeking to identify with employees' personal preferences contributes to employees' perception of being able to be themselves. However, this can rather be seen as the existing system of neo-normative control.

Another form of blurring the work and private life is presented by Müller (2017) who examines internal branding as an extension of culture management and normative control. Internal branding presents the idea of branding organizational members as a means to communicate the company brand to external customers, resulting in a brand message through employees as a 'branded entity' (Müller, 2017). Thus, internal branding emphasizes *"the representation of the brand outside the workplace as part of the employee's lifestyle and identity"* (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011, p. 188). Resulting from that, normative control as brand-centered control is created, according to Müller (2017). Unlike

the normative control that plays inside the company, brand-centered control also engages external audiences outside the company, such as the wider public, fans, and customers. Müller (2017) concludes that brand-centered control leads to blurring boundaries between employees' private and work lives, similar to neo-normative control.

2.4 Thesis framework

Up to this point, we have given a theoretical overview of organizational culture from socio-anthropological perspectives whereby different layers of culture were depicted (Schein, 1985). Our review included a discussion of cultural expressions (rituals, traditions, behaviors) and cultural experiences (values, feelings, belief systems) as well as a brief examination of the complexity of culture (Alvesson, 2013; Hatch, 2018; Schein, 2010). This was followed by an introduction of the second wave of interest in organizational culture research addressing the relationship between organizational culture and performance (Peters & Waterman, 1982). This second wave of research studies explored how corporate culture can be used as a management tool to improve business performance through employee engagement and motivation. The idea that corporate culture can be influenced or changed in accordance with management goals, has sparked interest in critical studies of power relations, control mechanisms, and resistance. Researchers such as Fleming and Sturdy (2011), Williams (2013), Kunda (1992) and Alvesson & Willmott (2002) started to discover cultural dysfunctions and experiences of employees regarding management efforts in cultural management approaches.

With the pace of change in business the increasing popularity of New Age discourses (such as well-being, mindfulness or employee engagement discourses), organizational culture itself has been seen as a competitive advantage for attracting top talent. As a result, companies started aiming to create unique and appealing organizational cultures that could attract employees' interests and preferences. However, critical management studies show that companies make use of culture management concepts to control and guide employees towards organizational goals. We have become curious to discover whether these culture management attempts can find a place in an educational organization providing employees with personal growth for achieving a higher level of awareness and with the mission to reinvent educational systems. Awareness in this context is understood as knowing and

understanding which aspects of life need to be developed. To satisfy this curiosity, a qualitative research method has been applied, which is described in the following chapter.

3   METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology and approach to the conducted research. According to Creswell (2014), a research approach is a set of decisions about how to conduct the research, the plans as well as the procedures that span general assumptions and specific research methods. In other words, a research approach involves intersections of philosophical assumptions, research design, and definite methods of data collection, analysis and provided interpretations (Creswell, 2014). In order to logically structure our methodological choices, we modified the 'research onion' model (Figure 1) suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016). This model demonstrates the methodological approach to our research, whereby every inner layer is considered in line with the choices made within every outer layer (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Thus 'peeling the onion' starts from general worldviews towards the defined research methodologies. Prior to moving to the examination of each of the layers, we provide a short description of the chosen organizational context that serves as a suitable environment for the purpose of our study. After the context is outlined, firstly, we consider the overarching research approach and the philosophical worldview that fits the purpose of our study. Secondly, we identify methods and approaches that design this presented research. Thirdly, we discuss particular methods for our data collection and analysis of the empirical data. And finally, at the end of this chapter, we discuss the credibility and trustworthiness of our research and provide a further reflexive discussion on our research limitations, which is followed by an ethical statement.
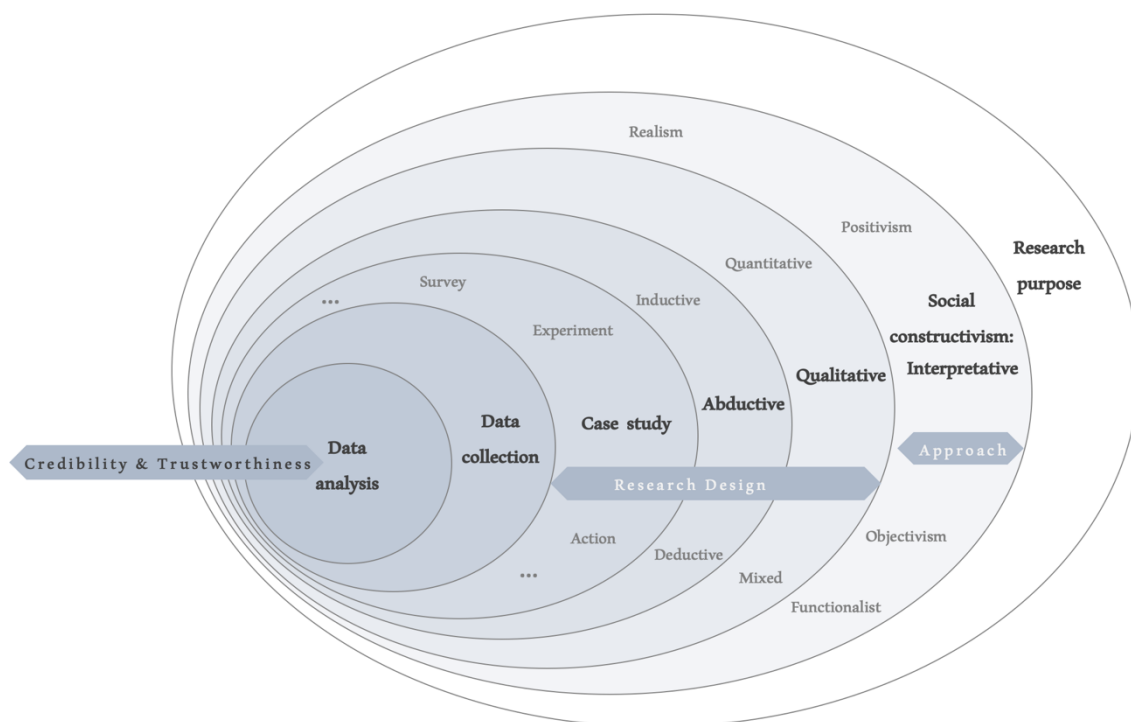

Figure 1: Modified 'research onion'

3.1   Research context

The organization, in which we conducted our research, was Brainwell[1]. Brainwell provides educational content and training to a wide audience on various topics of personal growth. The company describes itself as a learning experience company, sharing ideas and teachings in areas of personal growth through digital education platforms, learning events, and tribe-like communities (company webpage). Personal growth courses, programs and pieces of training cover a wide spectrum of topics such as lifestyle and productivity, mind and spirit, health and fitness, love and relationships, career and influence. Noteworthy, the personal growth curriculum proposed by Brainwell does not provide officially recognized degree certificates, as it focuses on informal personal practical capabilities. One example of the Brainwell's flagship course is LifeNote, which provides a guided framework for self-assessment by visualizing various areas of life and providing assessment points to determine which aspects require more attention for development. Another example is the Brainwell-Fest, an annual learning festival organized by the company in luxurious locations around the world. Targeting like-minded people (such as customers using Brainwell products and own employees), the festival features an agenda of workshops, training sessions, keynote speeches selected by Brainwell trainers and authors, and fun activities (e.g., excursions or social events).

Brainwell shares a belief that through continuous personal growth in different areas of life, personal development gaps, ignored by conventional educational institutions, can be addressed. By closing these development gaps through continuous personal growth, people are better equipped to live a happier, better, and more conscious lives. Consequently, a great practice of self-development discourses is existent in the company. The curriculum for personal growth is designed both internally (by creative teams responsible for learning and teaching) and externally (by cooperating authors, teachers or experts in the field). Brainwell programs are mainly offered to English-speaking customers. At the same time, the company is exploring new markets by experimenting with curriculum designs in other languages. Lastly, the prices for Brainwell programs vary considerably; events and various pieces of training range from free online courses to some festivals and 30-day programs with a cost of several thousand euro.

Brainwell currently has two offices, one in South East Asia and one in Eastern Europe, employing a diverse group of people with different nationalities and professional backgrounds. The office in

---

[1] The research company's name is anonymized, as well as the interview participants' names. In order to maintain research integrity, hereafter we omit the sources of information that might directly lead to the research organization

Southeast Asia, with which we conducted this research study, currently employs 230 people with over 46 nationalities. The company's work areas include content creation for programs and training, technical support, design and film production, marketing, event organization, people and culture development, and customer support.

Brainwell describes itself as an innovative, unconventional and modern company with a strong corporate culture and captures that impression through the company's website and social media presence. According to Brainwell sources, the company culture can be described as fun, empowering, creative, and '*extraordinary*'. The interesting distinction of Brainwell from any other company with a strong organizational culture is that it is actively focused on the personal growth of employees. In other words, the company helps employees, along with their professional development, to develop skills that are not directly related to professional expertise, such as personal finances, nutrition, fitness, personal relationships, and many others. Brainwell employees have unrestricted access to knowledge and are encouraged to leverage learning opportunities not only through external sources, but also through Brainwell's own courses and content. The company claims to have a holistic approach to employees, meaning that they care about the development, self-fulfillment and happiness of organizational members. On the website Brainwell demonstrates received awards and certificates, such as The Great Place to Work® (2013) and WorldBlu List of Most Democratic Workplaces™, that aim to confirm the positive approach. Thanks to this holistic view on employees and cultural management practices, the company has been the subject of various publications, keynote speeches, and business training, exchanging pieces of advice and expertise about how to build a strong and unique organizational culture, so that other companies would be able to apply similar principles. With this necessary understanding of the corporate context that served as a platform for our research, we continue to present the methodology used in our research study.

3.2   Research approach

A research paradigm is a general philosophical orientation, a worldview through which the nature of the conducted research is seen, and in which the research path is defined (Creswell, 2014). Organizational studies are part of a socially constructed world (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Searle, 1995), therefore, we conduct our research through the social constructivism worldview. Because of this worldview, the interpretative approach is considered as the most suitable technique

for discovering employees' experiences of culture management. Interpretivism is epistemology that is available because of people's ability to attach subjective meanings and ideas to various phenomena in a socially constructed world around them and hence, acknowledges the role of members that are part of a social object (Prasad, 2017; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Crotty (1998) identifies several assumptions within the interpretative paradigm. He determines that human beings continuously construct meaning through engaging with the world they live in and build their interpretations through social interactions. In other words, the interpretive research paradigm is formed on the assumption that social reality is shaped by social contexts, human experiences and interpretations (Prasad, 2017) leading to the creation of subjective information and knowledge (Longino, 1990). Furthermore, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016) emphasize the importance of adopting the interpretative paradigm in order to embrace an empathetic stance for the attempt of understanding the social reality in the way the organizational members perceive it. To gain a deep understanding of how cultural management is perceived by organizational members in an educational organization, we conducted a qualitative research study within an interpretative paradigm with the perspective of critical management studies.

The concepts of critical management studies are applied to further explore and deepen our interpretation of culture that is experienced by the members of the educational organization that focuses on personal growth. In general terms, critical management studies aim to delve into the underlying processes and question taken for granted assumptions, thus engaging in reflexivity and critical thinking (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Alvesson & Willmott, 2011). Notwithstanding, critical management studies perspectives aim at enriching our understanding of the organizational processes and act as a facilitator for a discussion about different perspectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2011), thus ensuring performativity (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009) and a dialogue rather than merely criticizing organizational processes or judging one's approach.

3.3 Research design

The second layer of the 'research onion' (Figure 1) constitutes the design of our study. The research design explains the type of research enquiry and approach that helped us to answer our research question. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research supports the exploration of understandings and meanings that organizational members ascribe to a social reality, which is also

typical for the interpretative paradigm, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, our study is designed in the qualitative research type.

Additionally, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016) suggest considering a specific approach that identifies the relation of the existing theoretical background to the development of new theory throughout the research. In our case, we were interested in normative control as a theoretical concept and, at the same time, open to the insights that emerged from our data. Therefore, we used an abductive approach to our research to explore normative control practices in an educational organization. According to Dubois and Gadde (2002), the abductive approach supports the generation of new concepts or the development of underexplored phenomena rather than simple confirmations of existing theories. Similarly, Weick (2005) and Swedberg (2012) advocate this abductive capacity of research by remaining open to the insights of the empirical material and moving the theory creation process between the existing theoretical framework and the continuous reflection on newly acquired empirical material. Therefore, the abductive approach served as the best approach for our study, enabling a broader understanding of the concept of normative control by discovering new ways (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017) of interpreting it.

Lastly, we used a qualitative case study which is mainly based on semi-structured interviews with members of the studied organization. The company Brainwell serves hereby as the means of exploring normative control in an educational organization focusing on personal growth. Yin (2003) defines a case study as an empirical enquiry that investigates a specific phenomenon within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The demonstrative example of Brainwell provided us with the detailed and rich empirical material, making the case study the most suitable research design for our study.

3.4   Data collection

Mason (2002) and Creswell (2014) state that the data collection in the form of interviews is the most common method in qualitative research studies. Two different types of data can be gathered in the data collection of research studies, namely primary and secondary data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). According to Hox and Boeije (2005), primary data is defined as original data which is collected for specific research purposes and goals. Secondary data, on the other hand, is data originally

collected, conducted and used for previous different research or purposes (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016; Hox & Boeije, 2005). Primary and secondary data have been used for our research study. More specifically, primary data was in the form of semi-structured interviews, and secondary data was in the form of company documents and company representations via the website, YouTube videos, and other social media platforms.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

The selection of participants for this research study was based on random sampling with an emphasis on minor criteria to achieve a diverse sample. Since the purpose of our study was to examine employees' perceptions of culture management efforts in an educational organization with a focus on personal growth and strong corporate culture, the focus was on finding a diverse group of interviewees. We interviewed organizational members from different departments, with different professional backgrounds and experiences and length of employment at Brainwell. In order to collect possibly diverse perceptions, we conducted the interviews across different functions, out of which two members were working at Brainwell for less than a year, four members with a term of employment from two to five years, and five members with an employment period at Brainwell more than five years (Table 1). The contact person of Brainwell provided us with the contact information of potential interviewees. His approach of asking employees to participate in the research study for Brainwell during a general team meeting led to several responses. Consented employees were individually contacted for scheduling the interviews. Such an open call for participation in our study helped us to facilitate possibly impartial selection of the interview participants.

Employment at Brainwell:	0-2 years	2-5 years	Over 5 years
With the people and culture: People & Culture, Recruitment	Janina		Jesse Laura
With the educational content: Content creation, Marketing & Communication, Learning & Development	Christian	Jack Marc Susan	Nicolas
In support teams: Customer Support, Design & Film, Post-production, Tech. support & Development		Stefan Mattias	Lilly

Table 1: Overview of the interview participants

Interviews can vary between unstructured, structured and semi-structured (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). To ensure the richness of the empirical material, we conducted eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews. This semi-structured interview approach is defined as having an overall direction and structure; however, the tone is fairly conversational and informal, which allows flexibility for adapting and clarifying questions if needed (Hair, 2007). An interview guideline (Appendix 1) helped us to structure our interviews and to ensure that the conversations served on achieving our research objective. Worth mentioning is, that even though the aim was to build questions seeking to cover relevant topics, we stayed reflexive and open towards other occurring topics. That is why semi-structured interviews were seen as suitable due to the fact that the freedom and flexibility of following up interesting and relevant thoughts and opinions are given (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016; Styhre, 2013).

The topics covered in our semi-structured interviews were organizational culture and personal growth. We asked open follow-up questions to get an in-depth understanding of the concepts and procedures used in the organization. We started our interview journey with a pilot interview, which was not been counted in our pool of eleven conducted interviews. The pilot interview helped us to pre-test the quality of our conversations which took place via Skype with the Malaysian office in Kuala Lumpur. It also helped us also to evaluate the designed questions and to determine whether any adjustments were needed before carrying out the remaining eleven interviews.

In addition to that, after every conducted interview we continuously reflected on the gathered data which helped us in further provoking deeper insights. An interesting question, that led respondents to reflect on their development in the company, was when we asked how a family member or friend would describe how they had changed since joining the company. This turned out to be a useful question since the interviewees started to give us deeper insights and thoughts they did not think of before.

Worth mentioning is that our gathered data represent a diverse set of responses to the study of the same phenomenon, resulting in a rich understanding defined as multi-vocality, according to Suthers, Lund, Rosé, Teplovs and Law (2013). Our conducted interviews did not solely seek to achieve one single perspective or truth; the goal was rather to deepen the insights and our understanding of how the culture was perceived by the interviewed employees and how it was maintained within the organization. One of the main advantages achieved in this study is that it provides an insight into diverse opinions and perceptions of employees about different phenomena in such an educational organization focusing on employees' self-development.

3.4.2 Company material

As previously mentioned, apart from the conducted semi-structured interviews, we analyzed Brainwell website and its appearance on social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. Besides that, internal video materials, provided by the company, were further included in our analysis. With the help of this secondary data, a better picture and understanding of Brainwell's approach of presenting their company culture and services could be gained. Analyzing Brainwell's website helped us recognizing the company's culture-specific language and expressions. The secondary data served as an additional source and perspective leading to a useful supplement to the primary data in the form of semi-structured interviews.

3.5 Data analysis

According to Styhre (2013) the data analysis explains how the empirical data was processed, structured, examined and interpreted after it has been collected. Similarly, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) suggest that the data analysis consists of three steps, namely 'sorting', 'reducing' and 'arguing'. The step of 'sorting' according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) represents the means

of addressing the 'problem of chaos', since the qualitative material is described as an amount of disorder. To operate with our empirical material, we firstly transcribed the recorded interviews with the help of Otter mobile application. Notably, Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) argue that the data analysis in qualitative research starts already during the interview process. That is why we not only paid great attention to what was said during the interview process but also how it was expressed. Consequently, while converting the audio format to the textual format, we preserved these expressions that were useful for our further analysis by placing the remarks into the transcribed text.

After transcribing the interviews, we structured the data in the form of detailed mind maps for each of the interviewees as a means to conduct coding process. Mind-mapping is a technique for creating categories (Buzan & Buzan, 2006), organizing the main domains of the data and displaying dynamics and relationships between the categorized concepts (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). We decided to follow this step separately and independently from each other in order to ensure a non-influential understanding and interpretation of the material. During the process of coding by means of creating the mind maps, we kept in mind the general topics of the interview questions, such as personal growth, normative control, and organizational culture, yet remained open emerging categories caused by further perceptions and insights. We later compared independently the created mind maps and discussed identified categories and ideas together to ensure a careful and in-depth categorization process.

This was followed by the step of reducing the empirical material in order to create a joint mind map combining our individual mind maps from each of the interviews. With the help of whiteboards, we first created an overview in the form of a table presenting the identified categories and placed sticky notes, including important interviewee quotes as well as important remarks which we identified throughout the interviews. The whiteboards have proven to be a very helpful tool as we could easily add new thoughts and connections without causing any chaos. Secondly, we reduced the number of sticky notes not only by combining them based on the common patterns but also based on the selection of how interesting these themes were, which is in accordance with a piece of advice by Styhre (2013). At this stage, we identified four sub-categories embedded in the strong organizational culture, namely alignment with the mission, autonomy, self-development discourse, and tribe-like communities.

During the last step of the data analysis, the findings from the primary data were examined with the help of the secondary data analysis to enrich our interpretations and understandings. Our key findings, addressing self-development discourses and employees' insights about how the organizational culture

is experienced, were analyzed not only based on what was identified but also how it was expressed. For that, we used the approach of analytical bracketing (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997) that encourages moving between 'whats' and 'hows' of the empirical data. This approach helped us to identify potential tensions in the employees' experiences from culture management as well as to recognize the used self-development discourses at Brainwell. Lastly, applying our research approach choices, we offered own explanations and interpretations. That was based on a piece of advice by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) who noted that in qualitative studies it is important to step up as researchers and to provide own interpretations, experiments with words and thoughts, and to formulate social criticism with the help of excerpts from the data.

Finally, Swedberg (2012) suggests that arguing on own empirical material is the theory creation process, where researchers not only learn the theory that someone else has argued about but contribute with own argumentation to the existing research. Thus, our argumentation not only provides own interpretations with the help of the data excerpts but formulates the researchers' own thoughts and social criticism, as also advised by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018).

3.6   Credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness are the most important aspects of studies for determining the quality of the research carried out. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017), these concepts can be considered as essential as they affect the credibility and quality of any research studies.

Applying the concept of credibility helps to test the practice of information elicitation whereby the most essential part of the qualitative studies is their quality (Golafshani, 2003). The credibility of a research study, therefore, looks at whether various conducted research on a particular topic will lead to the same findings when replicating the same research study as well as whether the study researches what it was actually intended to (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). For ensuring reliability in qualitative research studies, the examination of trustworthiness is vital (Golafshani, 2003; Tracy, 2010). Trustworthiness in this context refers to a researcher's flexibility, sensitivity, and creativity skills in the process of data analysis (Silverman, 2000). According to Silverman (2000), this includes the researcher's approach of leading the conducted interview with the help of designed interview questions as well as the environmental setting in which the interviews are conducted. The

trustworthiness of the results of this study may be decreased through participant error. Participant error refers to potential errors within the gathered data, which is caused by the interviewee's influence in form of subjective interpretations and bias responses (Brink, 1993; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). How we aimed to reduce this influence is further elaborated in the part discussing some limitations of our study. Furthermore, it is worth noting that our research framework is limited to one company. The data and findings collected cannot be considered generalizable to the majority of organizations or industries. However, the gained results could be seen as applicable and valid for organizations having similar structures, ways of conducting business, and goals as Brainwell.

In order to ensure the aspect of trustworthiness in our qualitative research study, we firstly maintained objectivity by being reflexive and by documenting and transcribing all conducted interviews. We kept notes and recordings during the data collection and aimed to switch between the tasks of asking the question and taking the notes. This approach helped us to stay reflexive and to avoid creating a subjective pattern or way of asking certain questions. On top of that, questions that were addressed to the interviewees were reviewed by our supervisor in order to ensure that leading questions, resulting in one particular outcome were avoided. Following this approach supported our aim of having a more open and informal discussion in which our interviewers felt comfortable talking

Besides ensuring reliable findings, we aimed to establish sufficient validity in our study. The concept of validity addresses whether qualitative results and interpretations accurately reflect the phenomenon of interest (Maxwell, 1992), so it relates to the accuracy and truthfulness of research results (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Mishler (1990) argues that the assessment of validity is not ensured by following procedures but rather depends on the judgements of the researchers. That is why he further argues that interpretations and meaning-making play a central role in this concept. To ensure the validity of our research, we first started with very open questions and proceeded with the follow-up questions in which the respondents were asked to exemplify their viewpoints. This was followed by confirmation questions, which aimed to assure our understanding of the provided answers and meanings. This way left less space for subjective interpretations, thus resulting in increasing the validity of our research.

3.7   Limitations

As already mentioned, the generalizability of our results can be considered limited (Brink, 1993; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016) due to the fact that the present study was carried out only with a qualitative approach in one case company. Our study does not include triangulation, that is understood as a research technique in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected in the same research phase (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016), which can be considered as the first limitation of our study. However, since our goal was to gain in-depth understanding, the qualitative research method was chosen as the most applicable approach, as mentioned earlier in our research design (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016), and therefore, this limitation was minimized.

The second acknowledged limitation is related to the time frame given, restricting the scope of this research project to a two-month process that could have jeopardized the quality of our study. Although the duration of the research could not be influenced, the intention of delivering qualitative study outcomes was supported by carrying out our research in the form of pair work. Despite the given time restriction, working in pairs involved taking different perspectives and interpretations into account resulting in comprehensive insights into our research topic.

The third limitation relates to the researchers' prior knowledge about the case study company. The company was familiar to one of the researchers via previous work experiences, thus, one of us could have formed some pre-understandings and perceptions about the company culture. However, the other researcher was not familiar with the company and its culture. Thus, the limitation due to possible pre-existing perception through the prior knowledge was minimized through reflexive and critical discussions between the researchers themselves. Thanks to conducting the research together, we believe that we achieved a complemented balance between empathic understanding and critical thinking in our analysis and interpretations.

Overall, it can be said that we reflected on possible limitations and tried to minimize them by ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of our research through the concept of reflexivity. Being reflexive required from us to acknowledge that we as researchers are influenced by our personal background and views as well as by our pre-understandings when making sense of the acquired empirical data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). That is why we paid substantial attention to the analysis if the acquired information from different perspectives. This required us to continuously step back and critically question each other's understandings but more importantly, we also had to question our

personal interpretations. The reflexive approach was applied not only for the analysis part but also during the data collection. All the interviews were conducted together, and both of us asked critical follow-up questions in order to ensure that the asked questions will not shape the outcome by assumptions or pre-understandings of us researchers. Although all interviews were conducted through Skype, much attention was paid to the body language of our respondents, which was helpful for interpreting the respondents' attitudes. Conducting interviews with the company members via Skype did not prove to be a limitation since this way of communicating is part of Brainwell's daily agenda.

3.8   Ethical statement

All interviewees who consented to participate in our research study were briefed on the overall purpose of our research and encouraged to ask questions whenever they felt the need to do so, as Shaw (2008) advised. Besides that, we ensured throughout the process that our research fulfills ethical standards as well as regulations of Lund University. To meet and respect these rules the company's and the interviewees' anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms, as suggested and recommended by Corden and Sainsbury (2006), Gregory (2003), and Oliver (2003). Lastly, the conducted interviews were recorded for practical reasons with the agreement and confirmation of the respondents and transcribed for the coding purposes. After the analysis of the data was completed, all the recordings were erased.

4   EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following analysis will guide the reader through the main findings of the empirical data gathered through conducted interviews and publicly available company materials. The structure of this chapter is based on four sections representing four identified themes that we define as 'culture attributes'. In this context, culture attributes are seen as features or characteristics, sustaining the strong organizational culture at Brainwell. These culture attributes are: 1) alignment of organizational mission and values with the values of employees; 2) ideas about personal growth and self-development discourses; 3) freedom against expectations, and 4) culture and tribe-like community (Figure 2). These main themes in the form of culture attributes derive from sub-themes that reflect the experiences of Brainwell employees with the given organizational culture, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Lastly, we identified four controlling forces that maintain and reinforce the organizational culture of the case company. At the end of each section, in which we introduce the culture attributes, a corresponding force is presented (in a subsection) that maintains and reinforces that attribute.
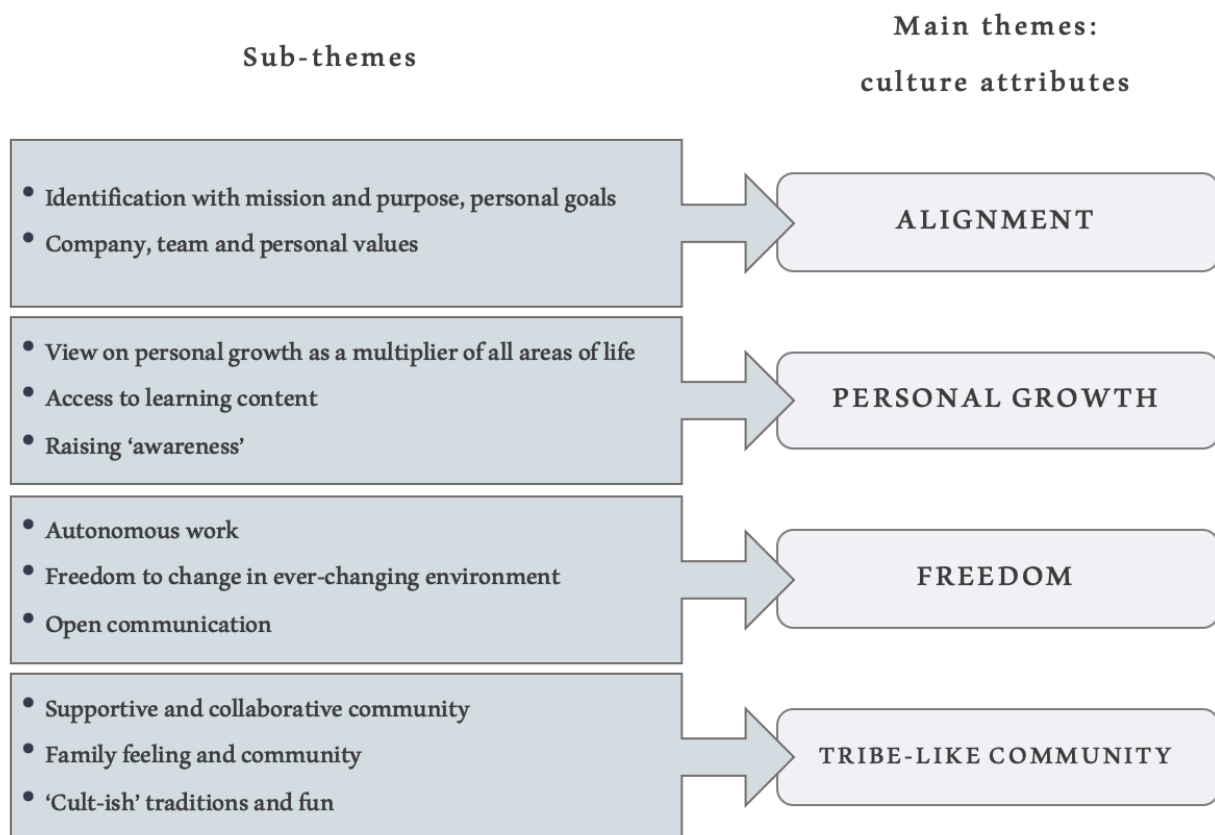

Figure 2: Overview of the findings

4.1 Alignment

The first culture attribute highlighted in our interviews was the company mission and value alignment with the purpose and personal values of its employees. This alignment is ensured with culture-fit assessments, practiced by the recruitment team of the company, which we describe in the subsection 4.1.3 'Culture-fit'.

4.1.1 Mission, purpose and personal goals

Interestingly, we could not determine an exact phrasing of Brainwell's official mission statement. Some of the assertions from different sources included: *"building the education model humanity deserves"* (company website - about); *"giving you access to an alternative curriculum that empowers you to kickstart your personal growth and lead extraordinary lives"* (company LinkedIn); *"individually and collectively raising the consciousness of the human species"* (company website - careers) or *"we are dedicated to ensuring that humans live happier, healthier, and more fulfilled lives by plugging in the gaps that conventional education failed to teach us"* (company blog).

Despite different expressions of Brainwell's mission statement, it seemed, however, that there is a shared aligned understanding of the mission among the employees. For instance, Lilly expressed her opinion about what Brainwell is aiming to achieve:

> *"Spreading the knowledge that Brainwell has to the world because that's what the world needs right now. We don't need more degrees; they are great, but at the same time - how do we improve [people] as human beings".*

Similarly, Stefan described the existence of a practical educational gap, that many people experience when attending traditional education programs at universities or other adult education schools, and how the Brainwell's mission aims at addressing this gap:

> *"Most of the people are trying to solve the education problem by making the same curriculum that actually fails. Education is a much bigger issue. [In traditional education] no one teaches you, for example, nutrition [...], relationships, how to take care of kids or how to be aware of your emotions".*

Herein we noticed a strong pervasiveness of the understanding of the mission among Brainwell employees. According to our respondents, most of Brainwell employees have already identified with the company mission when applying to the company. Marc, for instance, told us he initially applied to Brainwell only as a chance to pursue a career change, but then associated himself with the company's purpose:

> *"I didn't have a good understanding of what Brainwell was at that point [while applying]. But the mission got stuck in my head [...], it was compelling to me to get into a company that was helping people to become what they want to be, start to proceed the goals that they [people] really desire and not the goals that are imposed on them by society".*

Mattias, in his turn, seemed to be quite aware of his own interests and saw the Brainwell's mission as a way of contributing to his personal life purpose of *"helping individuals to grow and live happy and fulfilled lives"*. He told us he sees Brainwell as a platform that facilitates achieving a bigger mission, and thus, his employment in the company is one of many other possible ways of pursuing his life purpose:

> *"What's very important to understand is that the mission is much bigger than the company and the CEO himself. Also, Brainwell is just one of the tools to move towards that mission. So, if I lost my job today, I would still find ways to be fulfilled".*

Similarly to the previous statement, Susan, Janina, Lilly, and Laura also found that the company mission is highly aligned with their personal passions for continuous education, self-fulfillment, and supporting other people in achieving their potential for happier lives. Likewise, Christian commented: *"The reason I joined was because of the company mission"*.

Consequently, the alignment of the mission with the employees' personal purpose leads to experiencing the culture of Brainwell as purposeful and impact-driven. In the same context, some employees described the culture and environment at Brainwell as *"meaningful"* (Mattias, Susan, Stefan), *"visionary"* (Janina) or *"significant"* (Jack). Nicolas likewise concluded: *"Being really clear of what the company is trying to accomplish [its mission and purpose] has really helped to attract a lot of people with the same mindset, who want to be part of our mission"*.

4.1.2 Company, team and personal values

Similarly to the mission, the explicit values of the company play an essential role in the alignment that guides the behaviors and attitudes of the employees. Regarding that, Jesse reflected how shared company values transmit the desired behaviors: *"The company values were always there, but now they are clearly defined as behaviors - making values very specific means that you want to codify descriptive behavior"*.

The list of the company values is called 'Checklist of Awesomeness' and currently contains ten values that start with the first-person singular pronoun, such as *"I evolve through learning"* or *"I am positive and passionate"* (see the full list of values in Appendix 2). According to the interviewees, every employee at Brainwell is highly committed to these values, which is also symbolically intensified by swearing on the list of values when joining the company (further elaborated in subsection 4.4.3 - 'Cult-ish' traditions and fun). With that, Susan mentioned that each employee usually identifies differently with the values of the 'Checklist of Awesomeness', depending on how aware each person is of own values:

> *"Especially in such a value-driven environment, you need to understand your own values. Then you just need to carefully go through the company's values and identify which of them are also yours"*.

Similarly, Lilly explained that every team is usually guided by all the values from the 'Checklist of Awesomeness', however, every team can pick the most suitable values fitting their role, their department, and their personal preference:

> *"It is about which values they [teams] want to pick, to focus on, and then the rest is more for the individual choice. Most of us will strongly resonate with at least one of those values. One of my favorite values is 'I honor my words with an action', because being in the role that I'm in now, I can't just make a promise and not deliver on it"*.

To conclude, we found that the 'alignment' of the company mission and values with the employee personal purpose and values is a central attribute at Brainwell, as employees talk about these among each other in their teams. This alignment, however, not only attracts the like-minded people but can also be seen as a filtering and steering element of the culture. It helps to identify the desired behaviors and culture-fits both for the potential and current employees. This alignment at Brainwell is

practically ensured by assessing a culture-fit. In the following subsection, we analyze how this culture-fit is understood and evaluated by Brainwell.

4.1.3 Culture-fit

The CEO of Brainwell expressed during one of the recorded conference keynotes: *"You hire people who are directly passionate about your mission, who want to join your company, so, it becomes part of their life; your vision becomes their vision"*. A similar understanding is well-spread among the employees. Mattias, for example, repeatedly emphasized the importance of hiring the right people for ensuring a culture alignment in the company:

> *"Brainwell never tries just to fill in positions. We have this privilege of selecting people and making 100% sure that people are culture-fits in the first place. Of course, skills and achievements are also important. We do everything to make sure that we hire good people who have similar values that we stand for"*.

Jesse further shared why the recruitment process needs to be very selective at Brainwell: *"The assumption is, if you spend so much time and effort into hiring the right people, then you don't have to worry so much about policing them later"*. Consequently, we were interested in understanding what the 'right people' are and how they ensure that a person is a culture-fit for the company. Earlier Nicolas expressed that the company mission is attractive for some people, and he acknowledged that 'the right people' is understood as 'people with the same mindset: *"people with the right mindset, [...] or better 'same' mindset, who have the same approach to achieving our mission"*. One of the recruiters, Janina, noted that instead of teaching the candidates about the company values, Brainwell tries to identify how the candidates themselves perceive the company and how their own purpose would be supported by being part of Brainwell. *"We ask applicants: what do you know about Brainwell, how do you understand it, and how does it fit into your personal journey and career"* (Janina).

To gain further insights, we asked our interviewees why, in their opinion, Brainwell had selected them. Mattias, for instance, generalized: *"I was hired for my culture-fit and my values"*. Christian replied that he thinks he was selected because of his alignment with company mission and his interest

in personal growth: *"I am obsessed with learning and personal growth, and I genuinely want to make a contribution and make the world a better place".*

Through the interviews, it became evident that all topics, categorized by us as culture attributes, were considered for determining an overall culture-fit of the potential employees. Furthermore, the alignment with the mission and the values was set as a fundamental requirement. Jesse, responsible for the overall recruitment, identified that the degree of alignment of the culture-fit depends on the seniority level, implying that the more senior a position is, the more aligned the candidate needs to be, and that the alignment with the mission is essential:

> *"For entry job positions, I care about the mission alignment and relatable skills. For middle role positions, I care about the experience and an overall culture-fit. For a senior hire, I need someone who truly lives the Brainwell lifestyle and who is also a big fan of Brainwell, living the Brainwell way and being able to drive us to the areas we are weak at. So, if they don't have it, they don't get hired".*

Reasonably, we were interested in understanding how Brainwell assesses the culture-fit of the candidates. One of the tools that Brainwell uses is to request a video cover letter from the candidates. The company career page ('How to apply' part) instructs: *"Record yourself speaking in a 3 minutes video and tell us about your mission in life and how you grow yourself each day on the path towards it. How does Brainwell fit into that journey?".* Similarly, some of the interviewees (for example Nicolas and Marc) also confirmed that they think they were hired because of their ability to express their purpose through the video cover letter and impress with their attitude. As Marc recollected his experience:

> *"We have to send a video, which is already a little bit different. Not everyone would be that dedicated to completing it if they saw Brainwell as any other conventional company. I don't know anything about video editing, but I was destined to shine through it and demonstrate what I want to contribute with".*

Another interesting way of describing the culture-fit at Brainwell is by defining the 'Bar of Awesomeness', which is a general definition of suitability. As Laura shared: *"We not only want people who meet the Bar of Awesomeness but also the ones who can raise it by setting higher standards than before".* Accordingly, we asked our participants what they precisely understand by 'awesomeness' and how they detect that one is 'awesome'. Laura continued stating: *"They either*

level up the team by their aspirations or by their role". For Lilly 'awesomeness' is a combination of the overall culture-fit and the contribution to the company impact, as she concluded: *"Awesomeness is how we measure the impact that we have"*. Consequently, raising the 'Bar of Awesomeness' would mean contributing to excelling the impact through the ways of operating the business, as also Jesse expressed: *"We check if you are a culture-fit, but at the same time, we look if you can fill in the holes in Brainwell in terms of our strategy"*.

Further, Mattias stated that only a specific type of people would be able to succeed in the culture-fit assessment at Brainwell:

> *"It would be very difficult for individuals [who get used to passing various conventional professional or logical tests] to pass the Brainwell selection. As they would not be able to answer what their purpose in life, their core values are, what they care about and what kind of problems they want to solve in the world, why they are following this path in their career, and so on"*.

After the discussion about the culture-fit assessment related to potential employees, we were curious to know if any cases of cultural 'misfits' occurred while a person was already hired. Jesse shared with us a situation when a senior person was hired by the CEO directly, bypassing several interview rounds, which led to some conflicts:

> *"We had to fire [this person] due to all culture mismatches. We do not have many rules, but these hiring practices must be followed. We face huge problems if they are violated. I arguably had the most entertaining talk with the CEO where it was like telling an overly excited child: stop doing it, you are burning yourself!"*.

At the same time Laura confirmed that despite the strict recruitment practices, some hiring 'misfits' occasionally occurred:

> *"Our hiring process is already solid enough that we don't bring in the wrong people. But even with that, during the first three months [the trial period] both us and the applicants assess where they stand in terms of their own values [...]. We had a case when one employee found out during his first month that our culture was too much for him, so he had to leave"*.

In addition to the trial period, the adjustment of the culture-fit for the current employees was identified to be implemented through constant reminders about the company mission and impact. Laura told us that one of the 'tribe storytellers' (role of an employee responsible for culture) gathers and shares weekly stories about transformational results achieved thanks to Brainwell products from both customers and employees. *"This is another way of reinforcing and reminding about our purpose and our values"*, concluded Laura. In the same light, Jesse mentioned the practice of constant reminders about the impact and success stories:

> *"We have this joke around here... Andrew [CEO] tells team leaders one thing repeatedly, so many times... And when someone says: 'Stop it – you're like a broken record, stop telling us this story all over again', then he tells it at least one more time."*

Jesse continued: *"We need to create stories and role models. One of the main requirements of people in leadership positions is that they have to operate as Chief Reminding Officers about our impact and success stories"*. In the same line, Mattias reflected on how these reminders affect employee behaviors:

> *"You see the leaders at Brainwell who are continuously challenging their own beliefs and continually demonstrate super bold visions. Little by little, it naturally gets ingrained in us too."*

Finally, our interviewees acknowledged that Brainwell culture is not a fit for everyone. Stefan explained that the people within the organization are committed and able to perform on the expected level because *"they [Brainwell] are so selective of what kind of people get into the company"*. Laura similarly confirmed that Brainwell needs a specific type of people who have this strong purpose that they are guided by, because *"a sense of security is sometimes lacking"* and only *"people, who are able to easily adapt to things that are not perfect, usually thrive in our company"*.

4.2   Personal growth

The second identified culture attribute at Brainwell revolves around personal growth, which in our case is understood as employees' continuous development in areas of mind, body, and spirituality. Personal growth as a cultural attribute emerges from the sub-themes: 1) personal growth as a

multiplier of all areas of life; 2) access to learning content, and 3) awareness in areas of personal growth, meaning knowing and understanding what aspects one needs to develop. The findings show that personal growth concept at Brainwell is not solely offered as a business product externally to customers but is also actively practiced internally by employees. Employees experience Brainwell's organizational culture as a facilitating instrument for raising their awareness by providing great access to learning in areas of personal growth. The process of practicing personal growth is strengthened by the force 'journey to oneself', which we analyze in subsection 4.2.4.

4.2.1 Personal growth as a multiplier

"We are basically a personal growth company", stated Christian. To have a better understanding of this notion, we asked our interviewees to explain their definition of personal growth. Nicolas shared: *"Personal growth is a continuous journey of improvement, including sustainable habits related to becoming a better human for yourself and also for others"*. Many other interviewees emphasized that personal growth for them includes developing in all areas of life, multiplying an overall result. Susan determined her understanding of personal growth as follows:

> *"Individuals who actively work on their personal growth can be described as multi-dimensional, holistic beings, able to step outside of their career growth and view their life as a whole - regardless of whether the goals for personal growth address work or private life aspects".*

According to Brainwell employees, the further they develop in different personal life aspects, the more they are able to excel with their job performance. One of the examples was given by Marc, who connected his development in fitness and health to better concentration and increased productivity at work. Mattias similarly explained his understanding of personal growth: *"It is a multiplier of whatever one is doing in life - be it work or anything else [...], growing in my personal life helped me performing better in my career-related areas"*. Marc introduced another example and stated: *"Personal growth is a tool to empower yourself for achieving your own purpose and mission, which is also in line with the one of Brainwell"*. Mattias told us that many other companies might also focus on employee development, but it is different from personal growth opportunities that Brainwell employees have:

"Personal growth at Brainwell has an equal or even higher importance than just professional development. For them [other companies] there is huge friction between professional and personal growth experience. But at Brainwell, there is no friction at all".

Accordingly, Brainwell maintains the shared understanding of the importance of personal growth by emphasizing its view on employees as human beings and not just workers. Jesse, who is involved in recruitment, concluded:

"While you are working at Brainwell, you grow as a person. It is in addition to all the professional things. Brainwell really gives employees the time and opportunity to work more on themselves than in any other organization".

However, we noticed that personal growth at Brainwell becomes not only an opportunity in the form of a multiplier for all life aspects but also a requirement. Christian explained: *"For being able to work at Brainwell you need to seek for personal growth, for continuously developing yourself"*. This observation is further explained in the subsection 'journey to oneself'.

The above-presented insights of the employees show that personal growth is an essential element for working at Brainwell. The employees are encouraged to continually strive for personal growth, resulting in employees recognizing personal growth as a multiplier for all aspects of life. Brainwell supports this encouragement through a variety of learning experiences, which are presented in the following subsection.

4.2.2 Access to learning

"Brainwell is the best place to do personal growth as you have access to quality learning content", assured us Jack. According to our interviewees, employees have access to all Brainwell online courses and teachings, as well as to any other learning resources from external institutions. Some external training programs (meaning courses or seminars organized by partner institutions) or events (such as Brainwell-Fest coordinated by the company) are either covered by the company as a part of employment benefits or provided with an employee discount. Christian confirmed the existence of learning opportunities at Brainwell: *"We have access to everything: anything you want to study, any program, any book, any training - just talk to your manager"*. In relation to this, Mattias indicated:

"At Brainwell personal growth is offered to you on a plate, it's right in front of you, you just need to raise your hand".

The scope and the quality of available learning resources were praised by many of our interviewees. Christian commented: *"There is a lot of learning content, I do not think it is even possible to go through all of it in some period of time".* Lilly further referred to the quality of the available educational content in the form of courses and training programs at Brainwell as follows:

> *"At Brainwell, I feel like a kid in a candy store with the best quality sweets. I know that I do not have to try this random stuff for personal growth from the internet, I know that Brainwell has only professionals, real experts and top people in different fields who create our courses".*

Lastly, according to our respondents, employees are given learning content for a variety of areas, covering personal life interests, unlike traditional companies that provide learning content solely for professional development. Lilly reflected on her prior experience:

> *"I know that I wouldn't get this kind of support in a traditional company. They would just provide a set of learning most likely very related to the skills I need for my specific position. Of course, that's natural, and every company will have that, but Brainwell cares about me as a human being first, cares about my personal life interests and how I can grow in them too".*

Related to that, Jesse told us: *"We do our best in providing our employees with everything needed in order to develop professionally but - more importantly - grow personally. That is why a cascade of information and availability of learning opportunities is also seen as the lifeblood of Brainwell".* Consequently, we were also interested in understanding how employees define the areas of personal growth, which we explain in the following subsection.

4.2.3 High level of 'awareness'

By providing employees with learning opportunities addressing personal preferences and interests, employees are encouraged to discover and develop in new, unfamiliar areas in order to contribute to their self-fulfillment and personal degree of awareness. According to our interviewees, awareness is achieved with the help of personal growth, but it is an ongoing process, as stated by Laura:

"Personal growth is a never-ending process towards achieving awareness, self-fulfillment and a limitless mindset [...]. Brainwell provides you with a map you can use to achieve your personal aim".

Jesse further elaborated the relationship between awareness and personal growth: *"With our personal growth education, we cover everything related to consciously leveling up the way of living. It's about developing a conscious lifestyle of self-improvement in all areas of life"*. Accordingly, personal growth leads to some level of awareness, and the more one works on personal growth, the more one becomes conscious. Mattias similarly stated that *"raising one's own consciousness is the key to personal growth"*. He continued with a more detailed explanation that through personal growth, a higher level of awareness can be achieved:

"Brainwell is a company which sets an example for the society in making the world a better place. Brainwell does this by raising the consciousness of humanity [...]. So through transformational education in personal growth, people can become more aware of how to live better lives".

Related to this, we asked when and how this personal growth journey starts at Brainwell. All interviewees responded that everyone joining the company begins with the Brainwell LifeNote course, that helps employees to identify in what areas of life they need to develop. Susan reflected on this as follows:

"The Brainwell products and concepts, that we use, help us in all life matters - professionally and also more privately. The LifeNote course, for instance, helps us to become aware of different life aspects and goals, and helps us to tackle them".

The LifeNote product or program (our interviewees used both terms) was further described by Janina: *"The LifeNote program consists of mapping your life across twelve different categories, from intellectual development, emotions, spiritual state, romantic relationships to financial or legal aspects"*. Christian further stated: *"The LifeNote is a huge goal-setting map, I think it covers every aspect of your life"*.

To emphasize that LifeNote encompasses all areas of life and not only career-related aspects, Marc concluded that the benefits of this program are primarily for individual interests:

"The professional aspect of the LifeNote is literally 5-7%, and the rest is about non-professional, private aspects [...]. I don't think that the main goal of the program is for the company, the main goal is to enable employees to become more aware and empowered to develop in areas of their interest".

4.2.4 'Journey to oneself'

Inspired by the insights, the question occurred to what extent employees experience directed guidance in their journey of finding their 'true selves' through personal growth practices. According to our participants, Brainwell helps its employees to become aware of their passions and their 'true selves' through personal growth by working towards *"a better version of yourself"* (Jack). Susan further expressed that she discovered new passions and areas of interest thanks to the company:

"Brainwell is the reason why I have certain private goals I am passionate about now [...]. Brainwell triggers you to tackle things and problems of physical, emotional, and spiritual nature. It helped me to confront areas I neglected in my private life before and which did not contribute to my overall growth. Now I started working on them".

In addition, Jesse argued that everything related to the growth of psychological, mental, and emotional nature led to the creation of a coherent worldview that he developed through Brainwell:

"Brainwell gave me a mindset, a map on how to live my life and how it could evolve in physical, emotional, intellectual, career and private life aspects, eventually resulting in finding the intersections between all of that".

Jack interestingly summarized: *"I think Brainwell is a great experience for you to become more and more of yourself",* reflecting on the continuous journey towards becoming better. The journey of finding the 'true self' was understood among our respondents as a process of 'becoming better', as Lilly expressed: *"Everyone can become better: by being true to themselves and their values, at the same time, they can become the enhanced version of themselves".*

Furthermore, at Brainwell being the 'true self' means behaving in the same way at work as in private life, as argued by Laura:

> *"I strongly believe that people should be the same at work as they are at home, they should bring their heart, their whole self to the company [...] you should have one true-self for both areas - work and private life".*

This belief of employees being their 'true selves' is also supported by the company's approach of providing employees with positions that suit them and their interests the best. This approach results in frequent employee job rotations within Brainwell, as Laura explained: *"We are growing in areas in which we are highly interested in, opportunities to do that are huge at Brainwell, you just need to choose the ones fitting you best".*

Pursuing the 'journey to oneself', Brainwell employees often do not distinguish between the opportunities afforded by work or personal life. *"There is no such division between private and work life"*, noted Christian. Stefan further elaborated on the absence of this division: *"We see work as an important part of life which is not separable, that is why we do not like the term work-life balance".* At Brainwell the blur between private life and work is understood as 'work-life integration', according to the interviewees. Susan in this regard argued: *"The switch between Brainwell-life and personal-life contexts is intertwined, and making a clear distinction is very difficult".* In addition to that, Mattias shared that he was skeptical about the concept itself: *"I think the work-life balance concept is a huge warning sign: if you need this concept, then you don't really enjoy your job".* Consequently, our respondents expressed that they do not necessarily associate their job with work, but rather with passion and fun. Jack told us: *"Brainwell is the opportunity for testing, learning, searching for new stuff and playing with new ideas",* which is in alignment with the company statement visible on the website:

> *"We believe J-O-B is a dirty word. It's an outdated industrial age relic. Work, we believe, needs to be fun, educational, and something that makes you so excited that you jump out of bed each morning."*

Likewise, Jack expressed his experience with the 'work-life integration' in a form of passion:

> *"At Brainwell, your life purpose is actually so aligned to the company purpose, so that Brainwell could be your own company. And you can see it either as 'I never stop working' or as 'I actually never work' because it is my purpose, passion, and my lifestyle".*

The majority of our interviewees were in line with Lilly's opinion, who argued: *"We are all very passionate and committed here, as we love what we do, it can be clearly described as a kind of marriage resulting in a lifestyle"*. Jack summarized: *"Brainwell is a lifestyle, that allows you to grow in so many directions, providing you with everything you need to find your true self"*. Similar messages are conveyed on the company website: *"It [work] should be something that makes you grow, so, screw the traditional 9-to-5 jobs, instead, get paid to play, create, learn and grow"*. This example demonstrates that work at Brainwell is seen as a way of living by creating, learning, and growing, accompanied by joy, fun, and passion. Therefore, the work-life and private life are not seen by Brainwell employees as separate components but instead as a united form of a lifestyle. Describing the lifestyle offered by Brainwell, Susan explained the following:

> *"In the Brainwell-lifestyle, the requirement is to identify with the mission, the culture, the values; you have to have personal growth actively present in your life [...]. This lifestyle-package is kind of offered, but in a customizable version, meaning the degree of implementing it is in every employee's control"*.

We further asked our attendees what would happen if they had to leave the company that provided them with this certain Brainwell 'lifestyle-package'. Marc answered: *"If you're too tied and if you rely too much on the company and people, influencing and telling you what to tackle in your life, that might be really dangerous"*. Another critical viewpoint was given by Mattias who reflected on his ability to feel fulfilled independently from the company or his position:

> *"I don't feel so strongly attached to the company to the degree of making my happiness or the entire life dependent on being a part of Brainwell. Life should not be dependent on a company [...] you should be happy and fulfilled with yourself, in order to have a healthy relationship with others and the company you are working for"*.

Finally, despite the majority of employees saying that Brainwell helped them to start their journey towards their 'true selves', several interviewees shared with us that they did not really need Brainwell or its courses to the degree their colleagues needed it. Nicolas argued accordingly:

> *"I don't see myself as focused on self-development in the same way as a lot of my colleagues, so I don't say I've really needed the Brainwell products, or Brainwell to support me in that. I think I am pretty good at drawing a line, in terms of what people or books are telling me to*

do [...]. I have my boundaries. And I'm very protective of this boundary because I know what I want".

Nicolas further explained that especially young, inexperienced employees, who are still searching for their life path, tend to accept a lot of what the company or colleagues offer them. Marc supported this opinion: *"Some inexperienced colleagues tend to just latch onto the mission and ways of operating common at Brainwell, which is the easiest thing to do".* Stefan similarly described, that if someone is unsure about actions or ways of implementing something, the company helps to navigate: *"Brainwell guides you through the steps you are supposed to do when you are aiming for a certain goal".*

Moreover, several respondents shared that employees who have achieved a certain life awareness, communicate very openly if they do not believe in something. Accordingly, employees take or reject certain tasks available in the company in line with their preferences.

Finally, given that Brainwell offers employees a 'lifestyle-package' along the 'journey to oneself', we asked if this company's influence on private life could be considered as a sort of control mechanism. Marc provided the following answer:

> *"It could be seen as a control mechanism, however, I think it depends on the person, if there is someone who is doing something that he or she doesn't want to do but does it only because the company wants it - then there might be some sort of control. That is why we at Brainwell think it is important to find some sort of role in which you benefit yourself first as well as the company".*

4.3   Freedom

The third identified culture attribute is freedom, emerging from the subthemes of freedom through autonomous work, freedom to make an impact in an ever-changing environment and freedom to communicate openly. Freedom in this context means that employees are offered various opportunities to fulfill their professional role.

4.3.1 Autonomous work

Autonomous work at Brainwell is associated with *"flexibility"* (Marc, Susan)*, "independence and awareness about your job"* (Mattias), *"sense of ownership"* (Laura), *"self-accountability"* (Christian) and *"trust that you would perform in your work"* (Janina). Nicolas told us: *"there is a lot of autonomy, in the sense of, 'Just make sure you take care of it', so there is no immediate direction"*. Janina reflected:

> *"We have this freedom, but not in terms that you are just free to do whatever you want. You have the autonomy, we are not checking every single step [...], so work becomes more flexible - it does not matter at what time you arrive in the office as long as you do what you are supposed to do and you are reachable, which means you have to communicate much more".*

Stefan also told us about the given flexibility at work, but emphasized the increased sense of responsibility in response to the given freedom and trust:

> *"It is so flexible here, you are given so much freedom, and no one is checking up on you. But with so much freedom there is also more responsibility in terms of making sure you deliver. People actually become even more responsible in their performance, even though they are not in the office".*

Likewise, Laura responded to the given trust and the freedom to organize and maintain one's own work results, which leads to a sense of employee ownership: *"I can assure that 90% of Brainwell employees are approaching their work like as if it was their own company"*. This was confirmed by Susan, who stated that a degree of ownership and initiative is needed to succeed in this company: *"If you want to progress in this organization, you often have to find something that you think you can improve or contribute to, and then you just go for it"*.

All respondents shared the fact that they were granted a high degree of freedom and flexibility in organizing and exercising their professional role, but at the same time, the organization also called for a high level of work quality. Following this insight, Lilly elaborated on the expected results and the accountability to the teams and the company:

"In weekly meetings, the team leaders would ask where everyone stands in terms of their goals. We have the company-wide OKR's [objectives and key results], these are divided between the teams and each team member has his/her own personal OKR's".

Susan mentioned that Brainwell operates on the idea of managing by deviation, which means only examining the cases that do not match the expected performances. She also shared her own experiences with working under little instruction:

"I feel very comfortable in this environment with little guidance. Sometimes I need a certain planning horizon, knowing what's expected from me. The objectives and key results are a great help, they give me this sort of basic direction, and accordingly, I work my way through".

These results illustrate that given freedom at Brainwell comes with a lot of responsibility and expectations. Employees enjoy the opportunity to do their own professional assignments with little guidance, resulting in a sense of ownership. However, employees who cannot meet the company's expectations, receive more supervision, and cannot make much use of this given freedom.

4.3.2   Freedom to change

The freedom of change in form of innovation and experimentation was expressed by the employees thanks to the given environment, which was described as *"high on innovation"* (Nicolas), *"dynamic"* (Lilly), *"progressive"* (Christian), *"flexible, adaptive, and transformational"* (Stefan) as well as *"fast-growing"* (Mattias). Jack stated: *"In Brainwell we have only one constant - and this constant is the change".* Similarly, Susan confirmed: "*Thanks to our fluid structures at Brainwell, we are constantly innovating, changing, and evaluating for accomplishing our mission".*

According to our interviewees, the ever-changing environment at Brainwell facilitates the opportunity for impact, innovation, and growth, as Laura argued: *"It is easier for me to work in a little bit unclear environment where you feel empowered to change things, implement or build something new".* Nicolas similarly described how the structure of the company helped to create opportunities for personal growth and impact:

"We do not have a traditional structure: we are not a start-up, but we are not a long-standing established corporate business [...]. Here you cannot get stability and some reassurance, but you do have some room to play around. And so, thanks to this structure, you have opportunities for rapid growth and noticeable impact".

Concurrently, the ever-changing environment designed to maximize impact, requires flexibility, adaptability to a sense of insecurity, openness, and being *"hungry for new ideas"* (Jack). As explained by Stefan: *"If you are not a flexible person, you probably wouldn't enjoy working at Brainwell, as the very structured people, who need clear directions, tend to have problems here".* Similarly, Jack claimed: *"If you're not open, if you're not flexible, if you're not ready for change, Brainwell is going to be really dull for you".* According to Lilly: *"During the hiring process, Brainwell asks questions like - will this person be open enough to accept changes or be flexible enough to adapt?".*

Thus, Brainwell accepts the candidates who meet the criteria to operate in an ever-changing environment in which *"there is a general openness to new ideas and a willingness just to try things, innovate and take risks"* (Nicolas). Consequently, many respondents mentioned that the ever-changing environment also reinforces their ability to be more open-minded, riskier and innovative, as Jack argued:

"I believe that one of the biggest strengths of Brainwell is, that it is like a playground for new innovative ideas and minds [...] this 'moving fast' and being oriented to new solutions, finding faster, better ways made me become a lot more entrepreneurial, open-minded and curious".

4.3.3   Open communication

The sub-theme of 'open communication' emerged around descriptions such as *"high on open communication"* (Nicolas, Christian, Marc, Susan) and *"over-communicating"* - meaning providing excessive information rather than omitting information (Jesse). Interestingly, while open communication often referred to more factual information (e.g., course design or task-related updates), it also included communication about personal matters and personal growth issues. We identified that employees are given the freedom to communicate openly and straightforwardly; however, at the same time, it is seen as a prerequisite for the ever-changing and innovative

environment. Jesse strongly expressed the importance of transparent communication that enables innovation in an ever-changing environment:

> *"Some people might say, 'I don't talk about my work, because I feel that my work will speak for itself. That's not my understanding of transparent communication. Transparent communication is over-communicating so that everybody knows what's going on so that we can make better decisions everywhere. So, if you are not telling us what's going on, you are stifling the innovation of the organization, and you're being cancer to the company".*

Christian shared his understanding of open communication through sharing: *"That's how everything works here, everything is shared in a public space, every single thing. So, anyone can contribute there, so it is a very open culture".* The interviewees also connected 'open' and 'sharing communication' with straightforwardness. Susan mentioned: *"our communication style is pretty direct... even in terms how Andrew [CEO] communicates. He is very straightforward, no-bullshit-person".* Stefan further commented that it is very easy to approach anyone in the company or to have a conversation with the CEO during lunchtime, and also that *"the CEO of Brainwell has this WhatsApp group, where all company members can send him ideas, thoughts, and feedback right away".*

According to our interviewees, one of the ways to enhance and improve the openness and transparency of communication is to provide and give feedback. For instance, Lilly explained how feedback and communication led to constant improvements and continuous change:

> *"We're operating on constant feedback making sure we keep ourselves in check: 'Are we doing the right thing? Does this make sense?' So, asking the questions, asking for the feedback not only externally, but also internally is really important".*

Jack similarly explained his take on the feedback process:

> *"It is not only to listen to the feedback but even asking for more feedback. Then how can I put it into action, so that I can grow out of that? [...] A lot of things emerge from feedback, especially on a personal level".*

Interestingly, the latter part of Jack's example of open communication and feedback refers not only to openness in regard to work-related issues but also to openness in regard to personal issues and

emotions. Many of our interviewees shared that personal emotions are inseparable from human beings and thus, can influence work processes. Stefan provided us with the following explanation:

> *"There are moments when you are super down, you are feeling terrible, which has, of course, an effect on your work. So, they [Brainwell] have this rule that you need to tell [...] if you are not well. So, others, who are aware of that, would understand why you might be talking and behaving in a certain way this day".*

The same was affirmed by Laura. However, she acknowledged that an employee does not have to report about emotions and personal issues to everyone, but at least someone needs to be aware of the employee's emotional state: *"We also value transferring communication, so if the person is going through some difficult times, we expect them to communicate about these things with someone, not the entire team but with someone".*

Following our answers above, Brainwell employees are urged to communicate openly and transparently. It is noteworthy that not only work-related topics need to be shared and communicated with the team members, but also private ones, as this can affect other co-workers and thus, the overall work processes in the company.

4.3.4 'Freedom to leave'

The third force maintaining the Brainwell culture - more precisely the culture attribute of 'freedom' - is the force of 'freedom to leave'. This force has been discovered with the help of the following employee perceptions and experiences.

To learn more about the experiences of Brainwell employees in the ever-changing environment, we asked our interviewees whether they see themselves working for Brainwell in the future. The most common answer was in line with the one of Susan who expressed: *"I will stay as long as it makes sense and as long as I see my own growth and my contribution the company mission".* Marc mentioned that this question might be obsolete in a few years because it is difficult to make any definite predictions. This is in line with what Mattias expressed:

> *"It is very difficult to say, things are changing so fast, Brainwell is changing and I'm changing, positions are changing. I am happy with what I am doing now, but I am not necessarily attached to Brainwell as I know there are other opportunities to fulfil my purpose. I am in Brainwell, because I choose to, not because I need to."*

As Laura concluded: *"a* person *fitting perfectly five years ago might not be fitting well enough now; if they [employees] are not contributing, they themselves might not see any development anymore"*. Stefan elaborated on that as follows:

> *"The rule at Brainwell is, when you reach the point of not growing anymore, it is time to leave. It is a two-way street: if the company sees that you are not adding much value to the company, you are expected to think 'I should leave'. The same applies in the case when the company doesn't add much anymore to your growth".*

From these and many other similar examples, we conclude that employment usually ends when an employee reaches the point where some of the culture attributes, such as personal growth, no longer meet the expectations of the employee or the company. According to our respondents, the most common culture 'misfit' occurs when employees seek new growth challenges or more autonomous work. Nonetheless, many respondents indicated that connections to the Brainwell community usually remain and that employees leave the company on favorable terms. Mattias, similarly to Janina, Susan and others, elaborated on that as follows:

> *"You might say, 'Brainwell does not work for me anymore, and I need to do something else', but it does not mean that you reject all the ties to Brainwell. You remain to be a part of the community, [...] and it is a very natural process. Leaving the company does not mean leaving the community".*

Thus, employees stay with Brainwell as long as they are aligned with the organization's culture attributes, in this case with the attribute of freedom. If employees are no longer able to work under the ever-changing circumstances, presented in this section, the company considers it a culture 'misfit' and reminds its employees about their 'freedom to leave'. The same applies in reverse for the company. If the company is no longer able to provide employees with the culture attributes such as autonomy or personal growth, it supports employee's decision to face new challenges outside of Brainwell.

As mentioned in the introduction of this section, the force 'freedom to leave' is acting as an enabler for maintaining the attributes sustaining the strong organizational culture at Brainwell.

4.4 Tribe-like community

The fourth culture attribute we found is the tribe-like community, emerging from the sub-topics describing employees experience with the company culture as 1) supportive and collaborative; 2) family-like community, and 3) providing 'cult-ish' traditions and fun.

4.4.1 Supportive and collaborative

The majority of employees shared that Brainwell has a supportive and collaborative environment. As stated by Lilly: *"Brainwell goes deep and cares about employees as a whole, different from other companies who view people as solely a resource"*. As Janina explained: *"Brainwell is making everyone and everything better, we are all in this together, that's why everyone values, supports and helps each other, everyone contributes to the bigger purpose"*. Laura further stated: *"Every employee has its own journey of developing and contributing to the achievement of their purpose, Brainwell's stand is to create trust, space, and opportunities for employees"*. Nevertheless, all interviewees expressed that Brainwell might not be the only company supporting its employees. However, they have not experienced this kind of support from their former employers, which makes Brainwell a unique company they want to work for. Susan commented on this as follows:

> *"Brainwell might not be the only one company offering that kind of support to its employees, yet I would say that Brainwell is great in bringing three factors together. Firstly, building good working conditions where you get encouraged to take control of your life. Secondly, providing you with resources which give you great access to different areas of interest - be it personal or professional. And thirdly, hiring and bringing smart, caring, and ambitious people together who can help and support you along the way as a tribe"*.

According to our interviewees, managers or even co-workers are providing great emotional support by being caring and attentive to each other's daily journeys. If someone is struggling with certain

tasks and procedures due to lack of experience, Brainwell is often able to tackle the problem in the early stages, as Nicolas noted:

> *"Everyone helps each other out and invests own time to support the ones who are not familiar with assigned responsibilities and tasks. For us it is normal, we care and value each other, each individual's success contributes to achieving our primary goal of helping others on their way to becoming better".*

The majority of employees indicated that due to Brainwell's supportive culture they got confidence in trying out unknown areas leading to the development and creation of a 'limitless mindset', as indicated by Christian:

> *"The biggest thing I learned in this supportive environment, is that limits do not exist for me anymore. I learned that by telling myself 'I cannot do that' I was just limiting myself. Andrew [CEO] always reminds us to think big. So now there is nothing that I cannot accomplish, I just have to think about what I want to do, and I will get it done. It is that simple, there is no limit".*

As stated in the answers above, Brainwell employees are surrounded by highly supportive and collaborative colleagues who help each other out to achieve the company's mission. This supportive and collaborative environment results in forming a close community, which is further described in the following subsection.

4.4.2   Family and community

As mentioned above, Brainwell employees appear to experience a high degree of care and support in the company. The majority of interviewees referred to Brainwell as a family, or a 'tribe', where they are surrounded by loving, caring as well as respectful people. As stated by Jesse:

> *"We always highlight the importance of genuine care, spending time with each other and becoming friends. It is like in a family where intentions behind people's actions or behaviors are never negative and egoistic, and where no one intends to hurt you in any way".*

Similarly, Christian indicated: *"In 99% of the cases, people will be super caring and loving, and even sometimes overly caring that you may feel a bit strange in the beginning, if you're not used to such an environment"*. Mattias told us that at Brainwell, everyone is treated with dignity and respect: *"Every single member in our tribe stands behind you according to our values. The core thing is knowing that you are treated equally and with respect, no matter your gender, race, sexual orientation - like in a family"*. In this context, Susan came to the conclusion that *"Brainwell is a community before it is a company"*. Based on the mentioned community of a 'tribe', all interviewees expressed their affiliation and attachment to their 'tribe', like Laura: *"I feel being part of this family, part of this tribe, part of this culture and the lifestyle"*.

In addition, our respondents shared that each employee's voice is heard when making important business decisions within Brainwell. Lilly elaborated on this as follows: *"It is not like there is one person who makes the decisions, it is more collaborative, we say we are all part of this tribe and family, so we all work and operate together towards meeting our goals"*. This was confirmed by Christian who stated:

> *"At Brainwell we make major decisions together as a tribe, and everyone is acknowledged. You won't experience fights for individual acknowledgments here; we always make each other aware that without everyone's contribution and support things won't be able to happen, everyone plays an important part in our processes"*.

As just introduced, Brainwell employees experience a family, tribe-like community in the workplace where members are caring, respectful, helpful, and where decisions are made as a tribe. Within this tribe, different traditions and practices are followed, as seen in the following subsection.

4.4.3 'Cult-ish' traditions and fun

According to our interviewees, Brainwell has a strong culture with own traditions, rituals, and fun activities. Jesse shared with us: *"We always try to infuse fun in the office, for example by people dressing up in really weird costumes"*. Similarly, the company's website demonstrates:

"Fun and social connections are a big part of our culture. 'Work' at Brainwell often involves dressing in costumes, being covered in glitter, and flying to Jamaica to organize a festival. We don't do 'normal' too well".

Some traditions, that employees mentioned during the interviews, included the Culture Days (celebration of different nationalities represented in the office), Love Week (celebrating love and care for the colleagues), Female and Male Appreciation Days (celebrating genders), and various regular team and company retreats. Other mentioned rituals were: giving hugs to co-workers in the office (to show care), ringing of the 'Appreciation Bell' (to acknowledge team achievements and broken records) or swearing on the 'Checklist of Awesomeness' (the list of values) in the company's largest meeting room, called the 'Room of Awesomeness'. In this context, Laura elaborated: *"One ritual that I love, is when employees join Brainwell, they swear on the Checklist of Awesomeness, reciting our values".* Moreover, Brainwell's office is infused with inspirational quotes and superhero figures, as mentioned on the website and by our respondents. For instance, a 'Wonder Woman' is an unofficial mascot of Brainwell, as it symbols empowerment and *"doing extraordinary things"* (company webpage).

While the majority of the interviewees expressed their excitement and enthusiasm while talking about Brainwell traditions, several employees initially found some of the practices rather peculiar. However, they admitted that they got used to them over time, which eventually led to a normalization of these rituals. For instance, Marc remembered his experience with the ritual of giving hugs to everyone: *"Well, coming from the formal corporate background I did find it a little bit weird at first. I was not used to hugging in the office, but I think it is nice".* Similarly, Laura mentioned one of the new employees, who was introverted and not comfortable with swearing publicly on the 'Checklist of Awesomeness': *"He was not ready to do it just yet, so he asked if he can do it like in three months, and we were okay with that. So, he did it happily after three months then".* Christian similarly recalled his experience with the culture at Brainwell:

"At the beginning of my Brainwell journey, we went on a self-finding trip to the mountains, where we were asked some tough questions about what we really want to achieve in our lives [...]. In the beginning, I thought it was weird but afterwards I was very grateful because no one ever confronted me with this".

Taking into account these employee responses on the Brainwell rituals, we asked whether these symbolic expressions of culture could be associated with a cult, the following answer was given by Lilly: *"I think the most common feedback we hear is - you guys are a cult"*. Jesse further shared:

> *"I think Brainwell has a lot of characteristics of being a cult. Strong cultures are one of the main reasons why cults work, minus the destructive aspects of it. We take the elements of what makes cults really work as effective organizations and then turn it towards trying to create good in the world. So, what's wrong with that?"*.

Similarly, Marc stated: *"Several activities in our tribe might sound very weird and unusual. I had the same impression, but you really need to experience it on your own before becoming simply judgmental"*. Laura further elaborated that Brainwell could be associated with a cult, because *"we have a tribe-like community with own rituals and we have a leader like Andrew [CEO] as the guardian of our Brainwell-lifestyle and culture"*. She continued: *"But I do not have any negative connotation with that. In order to build tribes, you need to have rituals, which is totally fine with us"*.

Some other respondents, like Mattias, Christian, and Marc elaborated what these culture traditions really mean to them. As Mattias expressed:

> *"When we think about culture, we usually tend to focus on things on the surface, [like] Female Appreciation Day, Love Week […] that would not work, if the basics, the core things were not covered. The core things are knowing and feeling that people actually care about you, that our leaders stand behind the values that they communicate"*.

He continued by telling us that traditions uphold the company values and help to have a lot of fun together and bond employees as a community. Likewise, Lilly concluded: *"We have a high-performance culture, but we also want to have a culture that is human, aligned to our tribe. That is why we have these events where we have fun"*.

4.4.4 Self-development discourses

By reviewing employees' perceptions within the tribe-like community, we identified another force enhancing the strong organizational culture, namely the self-development discourses. As presented

earlier, all Brainwell employees are exposed to personal growth. Accordingly, this self-development discourse regulates practices and views on personal growth within the tribe-like community. As stated by Jack:

> *"One of the best things in Brainwell is that whenever you enter the company, you are so impressed by others, everyone is doing something to grow themselves, everyone talks about personal growth, that if you don't do anything you feel awkward".*

Moreover, employees at Brainwell are eager to share their progress in personal growth, reinforcing self-development discourses, as explained by Jesse: *"At Brainwell everyone shares their aimed goals and ways of achieving something; in that way, people know with whom they can share specific experiences and insights".* Moreover, Christian stated: *"I thought I was growth-obsessed and talking a lot about it, but when I joined Brainwell I was literally blown away: so many like-minded people are sharing tips and experiences about so many things".* Related to this, Marc revealed: *"It is so different from conventional companies, where people tend to hide their personal thoughts and aims, here at Brainwell everyone talks so openly about it and everyone in our tribe community is so interested in helping you out".* Resulting from this constant use of self-development discourses, we asked our participants whether they feel the pressure and stress to constantly develop. the following answer was given by Laura:

> *"We don't want people in the company to be in a constant rush for goals or personal growth. We openly communicate this and that's where our team managers also come into play. They have a crucial role in reviewing personal growth goals and check whether their members do not end up overdoing things".*

In regard to this, Jesse further explained:

> *"We are aware that young employees who join Brainwell don't know how to achieve a certain balance in their personal growth journey [...] and we try to actively work on this, by providing supportive guidance and by using transparent communication".*

In addition, it is important to mention that we paid close attention to the used language of the interviewees. Employees of Brainwell used a specific language and phraseology while expressing themselves. Many employees used the same discourses or expressions as the CEO, which we observed in different communication platforms of Brainwell. During the interviews, the most

highlighted words and phrases were: *"making magic possible"*, *"bringing love and care"*, *"people and community"*, *"impact and purpose"*, and *"extraordinary"*. This was also noticed by some of our interviewees like Mattias who explained the following:

> *"It is normal for instance, that employees who just recently joined Brainwell, tend to make use of the presented type of wording generally used at Brainwell or by Andrew [CEO]. The longer employees are part of Brainwell, the more they develop and the more they create their own type of wording for expressing themselves".*

5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we discuss the main findings of our research study, presented in chapter four, by putting them in context with our conceptual framework in chapter two. Particularly, we discuss how employees experience culture management in an educational organization that has its focus on reinventing the educational system through personal growth. We further discuss how the company forms and maintains its culture by applying different sorts of control mechanisms, such as normative and neo-normative control.

So far, we have identified that the organizational culture of Brainwell is formed and maintained through four culture attributes, resulting in a unique form of culture management. Shared consistent beliefs and value systems are spread and lived throughout the company. According to our respondents, this culture is experienced as supportive and empowering. This is in line with the organizational culture literature, which describes rigorous, unified beliefs and values as drivers for strengthening cultures in organizations (Schein,1985; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Willmott, 1993). However, taking the critical perspective of Willmott (1993) into account, an underlying level of control in the form of four overarching forces was acknowledged throughout our findings. These underlying forces, maintaining the culture attributes, could, therefore, be considered as constrainers, that constitute a form of normative control not noticeable by organizational members. This is elaborated by Kunda who argues that normative control is *"the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions"* (1992, p. 11).

5.1 Normative control through the 'journey to oneself'

According to our findings, the most crucial prerequisite at Brainwell is that the personal purpose and values of employees are aligned with the mission and values of the company. Arguably, one's values and a sense of purpose are associated with a deeper and more unconscious cultural level and thus, from the organizational management perspective, they are hard to change or influence (Schein, 1985). Consequently, to achieve this stage of alignment with less managerial effort, companies apply selective recruitment processes (Etzioni, 1975; Williams, 2013). Results gained from our interviewees indicate that case company practices very selective recruitment, detecting employees'

personal purpose and culture-fit. Organizations that can define employees' purpose have a better foundation for winning employees' 'hearts and minds' (Wilmott, 1993) in the form of managing their thoughts and feelings (Kunda, 1992). Our case study also exemplified that the more senior a position is, the more aligned the belief system of an employee needs to be. This is in accordance with Ouchi (1980), who argues that the more inexperienced employees are, the easier the process to normalize them in the direction of organizational objectives (and vice versa), thus contributing to forming a strong and unified organizational culture.

Willmott (1993) further argues that companies design strong cultures to create a normative environment aiming to reach a stage where there are no competing values or value mismatches. Aligned and shared values usually serve as a basis for developing a strong collective sense of belongingness among employees (Schein, 1985). Interestingly, we found that the espoused values of the company (the 'Checklist of Awesomeness') started with "I" (for instance, *"I dare to dream big"*) rather than with "we". In our case, the company comparatively focuses on individuality by addressing employees' first-person singular perspective. Arguably, this approach aims to facilitate employees' identification with the company values. It is noteworthy that the individuality of the employees is emphasized; however, the organizational values within the company are also recognized collectively and holistically.

To broaden this idea, we identified a tension between individuality and collectivity. On the one hand, the company values collective impact and contribution through a tribe-like community, but on the other hand, it creates tension by evaluating employees' achievements in personal growth, leading to individuality. This tension, however, is not visible on the surface due to the collective interest in personal growth. Every individual is supported by the tribe in the path of personal growth, which results in a unified collective community where individuality is accepted and embedded harmoniously.

Referring back to the values, Waterman (1988) argues that the pervasiveness of shared beliefs and values among the employees is a premise for strengthening corporate cultures, which facilitates a higher degree of commitment. Similar was also visible in our study: the more employees were able to identify with the company's values and beliefs, the more committed they were and the more responsibility they were willing to take. Consequently, Willmott (1993) identifies that strengthening the culture creates a normative environment, where more autonomy is provided to the employees as there is no need for close managerial control. In our case, this was practiced by providing the

employees with a great degree of autonomy with the trust that employees commitment will result in expected performance.

In continuation, according to Etzioni (1975), normative control practices are continued by socializing employees into a culture-specific environment. In support of that, our findings indicate that the normative environment is further maintained through events, rituals, and traditions, serving as constant reminders about the company's purpose, values, and mission. This was particularly visible in the cases when one of the recruits asked for permission to swear on the 'Checklist of Awesomeness' later and eventually did it, or when an employee found hugging in the office weird at first but then normalized it as a nice practice. In conclusion, thanks to the initial alignment, employees perceive the beliefs and the value systems of the company either as useful or as fundamentally their own, consequently, internalizing them without any significant resistance. This is in line with Bushe (2010) who argues that manifested culture can be normalized, thus becoming taken-for-granted.

As a result, in our case, employees do not distinguish between their own welfare and the company's success, which is in alignment with Barley and Kunda (1992). They, therefore, make responsible use of their own work and performances in order to contribute to the overall business success. Noteworthy, this alignment also reflects the nature of work in our case study, where employees accomplish their tasks with a great sense of ownership under little managerial direction by applying a solution-oriented approach. Thereby, 'the company vision becomes the employee vision' is achieved through a selective recruitment process. The socio-cultural activities, on the other hand, create a high degree of aligned beliefs and value systems among the members of the organization.

A particular self-development discourse could be identified at our research company, acting as a driver for creating an environment in which employees feel free to talk and engage in personal growth activities. This is in alignment with Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), who argue that organizational discourses help to reason and construct the social reality within an organization. Aligned with that, Grant and Hardy (2004), claim that organizational discourses are seen as the ways how organizational members express and conduct themselves in specific organizational environments. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) further state that shaped and influenced interactions of social reality can, at the same time, shape and influence the experiences and behaviors of organizational members in a variety of different settings. As visible in our study, employees do not only engage in personal growth activities during private life but also at work, resulting in achieving a 'limitless mindset'. This mindset forms

a belief that anything can be achieved by practicing personal growth. Therefore, employees are encouraged to innovate, experiment and eagerly work on their personal development.

Such discourse of self-development shapes and normalizes the experiences of organizational members, reinforcing the formation of like-minded unique communities and helping individuals in their 'journey to oneself'. This is in alignment with Alvesson (2004), who claims that organizational members are connected to the organization through communicating the 'greatness' as well as the uniqueness of the company, resulting in the creation of strong community. The uniqueness of our case company, consequently, was identified to be in placing personal growth in every aspect of employee life. Related to that, individuals who are not interested in personal growth would get a sense of discomfort in a company which is defined as a 'personal growth company', as shared by our interviewees. Kunda (1992) and Barley and Kunda (1992) argue that this control mechanism operates with the help of organizational members regulating and influencing each other's reputation. Therefore, members aim to internalize attitudes and beliefs that are generally accepted among organizational members for the sake of their own reputation. In our case study, there is a reputation for 'growth obsession' in which individuals work continuously and eagerly on their personal growth. This insight is further elaborated by Gabriel (1999) who states that companies apply ways of control in the form of subtle practices and discourses, seeking to promote employees' self-regulation as well as to achieve less critical employee interpretations of company's purpose and management approaches (Gabriel, 1999).

Another identified control mechanism can be related to feedback and open communication practices. At our research company, employees are asked to communicate openly not only about work but also about personal feelings, state of mind, and emotions. This is in alignment with Wilmot (1993), who argues that the primary concern of culture management practices is to form and manage thoughts and feelings of employees. The organizational culture literature views employees' feelings as more unconscious, and thus, less evident (Schein, 1985). In our findings, we demonstrate that employees see open communication and feedback as a supportive tool for becoming more aware of their own emotions and evaluating their thoughts and feelings. However, the critical study perspective (Foucault, 1982; Kunda, 1992) regards open communication on personal matters at work as an attempt to elicit feelings of employees with a purpose of directing their actions, which is a practice of normative control.

5.2 Neo-normative control entering private spheres

During our analysis, we have realized that through the focus on personal growth, the path of neo-normative control is created. Personal growth concepts are offered as a package of ideas and beliefs which employees start to find desirable and seductive. Neo-normative control, as stated by Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), is an extension of culture management that is built on value-centered discourses addressing individuality, authenticity, having fun at work as well as embracing the unification of private life and work life aspects. Similar was also visible in our study, as self-development discourses have been used to address individual development goals, covering professional work areas and non-work-related life aspects. Since no division is made in terms of personal growth areas, employees are encouraged to bring their 'whole selves' to work, as pointed out by our interviewees. At our case company, the belief is shared, that people should be the at work as they are at home, there should be one 'true self' both in work and private life, as our findings demonstrate. The authenticity provided gives employees the freedom to be themselves and to share their personal growth goals during working hours, despite whether they are work or non-work-related goals. As previously mentioned, through autonomy and flexibility employees are also receiving a high degree of freedom and trust in managing and planning their workload and workday, resulting in being highly committed to fulfilling the expected performance. As shared by our interviewees, organizational members demonstrate even a greater degree of commitment and responsibility through the given freedom and trust.

Bramming, Kristensen, and Pedersen (2010) state that in neo-normative control organizational members are free to choose and decide how to execute their tasks, and willing to contribute their selves in favor of the organization. Through the provided authenticity, employees receive the freedom to be themselves and to share their personal growth goals during work time, independently from whether these are work or non-work-related areas. In our case company, the belief is shared that employees' happiness and fulfillment in personal life aspects eventually leads to contribution to their performance in work-related areas. Which is in alignment with Bloom (2016) and Pedersen (2011) who share that authenticity reinforces the effectiveness and performance of individuals, paradoxically resulting in organizational benefits.

Another key element of neo-normative control is having fun and turning the workplace into a playful, enjoyable work-environment, as argued by Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011). This also applies to our case study, where the belief is shared that people spend most of their lives at work, making work fun

and worth *"jumping out of bed every morning with excitement"* should be therefore guaranteed. Our findings provide several examples of fun and social activities practiced by the company for creating an exciting and enjoyable work atmosphere. Fleming and Sturdy (2011) argue that companies justify this with the attempt of creating a supportive and diverse environment to which employees develop a feeling of belongingness. This was also confirmed by our interviewees who shared their sense of belongingness to their tribe-like community. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) introduce an extension of normative control – neo-normative control – which aims to structure a workplace in which the traditional line of separating private and work life aspects, as well as the boundary between work and fun, is blurred. Similarly, according to our findings, through the focus on personal growth, the line between work and private life is strongly blurred, resulting in a work-life integration.

A further important component contributing to this blur is the already mentioned alignment of employees' purpose with the company mission. Interestingly, our interviewees shared their awareness of this blur but stressed that a balance between work and life is not needed because the company enables the development of employees in a variety of areas of life. By offering employees work positions that are in line with their interests and preferences, an attractive and desirable work environment is created. Hence, work is not anymore associated with just work but instead with passion, as shared by our respondents. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) elaborate that neo-normative control enhances the enjoyment of the job through the freedom of identity and emotional expression surrounding the work position rather than through it, which is also the case in our study.

As claimed by Fleming (2009) and Walker (2011), neo-normative control hinders individual freedom, as freedom is only given to a certain degree. Organizational members are seen as culture-fits as long as they are in line with the company's culture given as a framework in the form of a lifestyle-package. As shared by our respondents, products like LifeNote support the pursuit of a lifestyle with a focus on personal growth. A sort of ideological element of personal growth is, however, visible when considering the general attitudes towards those who fail to pursue expected personal growth. As soon as organizational members stop making use of the given freedom to work on their personal development, paradoxically they are considered as culture 'misfits' who are not able to contribute to the company mission, resulting in employees accepting their 'freedom to leave'. This demonstrates that attention is drawn away from the fact that the company practices control by putting a focus to a general cultural misalignment and projecting an impression that it is the employees' own choice to pursue other opportunities.

5.3   Reflection on normative control

Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011) describe the practice of neo-normative control in a call-center business, where work practices are highly routinized, mechanized, and tightly controlled. On the contrary, our study illustrates a new, rather opposite nature of work. As described by our respondents, their work is highly innovative, challenging, creative, purposeful, and flexible. In this company setting employees are encouraged to continuously develop themselves for achieving greater awareness and contributing to the mission of the company to reinvent education. Through the idea of lifelong development in personal and professional life aspects, a personal growth lifestyle is created, leading to a blur between work and private life. In other words, personal growth in this context resulted in an ideology that pervades into every aspect of employee lives (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009).

Whereas Müller (2017) presents the blur of private and work life in the form of internal branding, defined as brand-centered control; in our study, this blur is achieved through the focus on personal growth. Through the employees using personal growth products offered by the company in their private life, normative control finds a path outside the organizational boundaries. Important to stress here is that unlike in Müller's (2017) case, the employees are not taking the role of communicating or selling the company brand to external audiences as a product or service. Instead, employees in our case carry their professional expertise of developing themselves into their private lives. Nevertheless, the basis for neo-normative control continues to exist and goes both ways. On the one hand, employees bring aspects of personal life into the workplace, and on the other hand, they incorporate the offered work practices of personal growth into their personal lives.

Another finding different from the work of Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), is that in our case, employees are not only encouraged to 'be themselves at work but are also encouraged to continually work on their personal growth in order to find their 'true self'. This leads to a new kind of normative encouragement of '*becoming* yourself' in accordance with the company's educational goals and expectations.

A further interesting discussion point is the perception of personal growth that leads to a higher level of 'human consciousness' and thus, to happier lives. Our results show that employees have access to a variety of learning content for their personal growth. According to the insights from our empirical data, 'consciousness' and 'awareness' can be equated with the understanding of reflexivity and

critical thinking in academia (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Alvesson & Willmott, 2011). Based on this argumentation, we could assume that our case company encourages its own employees to engage in critical thinking and reflexivity. Our findings show that employees are indeed encouraged to continuously question the ways of achieving the mission by being open-minded and innovative. In spite of that, we, on the contrary, argue that reflexivity is encouraged only until a certain degree and within the discourse that is formed by the company. Furthermore, our results demonstrate that employees perceive the company's personal growth products as rich in content and quality. Without questioning this perception per se, we question the range of perspectives on the topics offered. To ensure the breadth and depth of the content that helps to raise awareness of diverse and challenging perspectives, we suggest encountering perspectives and opinions that are different from those that are aligned with the company philosophy and view.

Similarly, the LifeNote course aims to increase employee awareness by providing a framework for personal growth. The majority of the employees argue in favor of this framework since it makes them aware of which choices to make regarding personal growth areas. From a critical lens, however, it can be seen as a practice of neo-normative control, as presented by Fleming and Sturdy (2009). In our research company, neo-normative control is not only applied through blurring the line between personal and professional life aspects but also by providing employees with the freedom to be themselves. Ironically, this freedom is only given to a certain degree. This finding is similar to the conclusions presented by several authors such as Lewis (2003), Bloom and Cederström (2009), Fleming and Sturdy (2009) and Walker (2011). As we expand the metaphor of seeing our studied company as a 'map' and 'personal growth wheel', where each employee has the opportunity to determine the direction of personal growth, we can ask ourselves if the map represents only one selected part of the world. Also, whether the 'wheel' is sufficiently maneuverable for the driver to turn to unexplored and unpaved roads. With this, we do not debate the applicability of the company's concepts nor their mission to increase the level of 'consciousness' through personal growth but advocate the importance of considering different perspectives, areas of knowledge, and knowledge creation processes.

6 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the application of normative control mechanisms by examining how employees experience culture management in an educational organization with the focus on personal growth. To remind our reader, unlike professional development, which is traditionally understood as the development of work-related skills, personal growth is rather understood as a continuous effort to improve oneself in intellectual, moral, and physical areas of life. Little research has been done on control mechanisms of culture management in work environments where the nature of work is predominantly innovative, creative, and employee-centered. We were particularly interested in exploring normative and neo-normative control mechanisms in such organizational environments by analyzing the experiences of employees with the given culture management.

With the help of the theoretical and methodological study frameworks, we found that our case company has a strong organizational culture. The uniqueness of the company is in its culture management, which can be described through four culture attributes. These attributes are: 1) alignment of organizational mission and values with the values of employees; 2) ideas about personal growth and self-development discourses; 3) freedom against expectations, and 4) culture and tribe-like community. Within these cultural attributes, we identified four forces of controlling nature: 1) culture-fit, describing normative recruitment practices and culture adjustment; 2) 'journey to oneself' describing the expectation for employees to continuously work on their personal growth; 3) 'freedom to leave', addressing the suitability of employees to changing environment, and 4) self-development discourses addressing the common language of the company expressing the meaning of personal growth.

6.1 Contribution to academia

Based on our research findings, three major contributions to the concepts of culture management and normative control could be made. The findings demonstrated the existence of normative control practices, which was supported by critical management studies literature. More importantly, we found that an extension of normative control – neo-normative control – finds its presence in the culture management of an organization that aims to educate about personal growth by focusing on the authenticity of individuals. Our findings addressed the existence of neo-normative control as a

'journey to oneself'. As elaborated by existent literature, these forms of control are not perceived by employees on the surface level, and they act as 'invisible' underlying control mechanisms.

Our first finding showed that neo-normative control finds application in an organization where work is characterized to be highly innovative, creative, flexible, and autonomous. We discovered a new enabler for neo-normative control, which is used in this type of work. In contrast to Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), who conducted their research in a very routinized and controlled work environment, we discovered that the aspects of fun and joy in our case are somewhat supportive factors of applying neo-normative control. Instead, the key element for the application of neo-normative control in our case is the process of practicing personal growth. With the help of personal growth, a path outside organizational boundaries is created, 'spilling over' to employees' private lives. By that, personal growth becomes the essential factor enabling neo-normative control to enter employees' private life aspects. Contributing to Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), we identified that neo-normative control expands beyond the organizational setting and has a broader impact on employees' personal lives.

Furthermore, unlike brand-centered control (Müller, 2017), where the employees turn into the means of communicating the company brand to external customers (e.g., by wearing the company uniform), employees in our case fully embody their professional expertise in personal growth. This expertise in personal growth is fully transformed into employees' private lives, resulting in a unified lifestyle. As a result, employees become their own source of normative control with the given company's lifestyle, in which personal growth determines all areas of life. At the same time, the lifestyle of the employees becomes an exemplary result of the efforts of the company. Since practices of personal growth have a positive effect on employees' lives, the process of entering private life through personal growth concepts is not perceived as disruptive or restrictive but rather as enriching and enabling.

Our second finding was related to a more nuanced expression of neo-normative control through authenticity. Fleming and Sturdy (20011) introduced the concept of 'just be yourself', where employees are recommended to bring their authentic selves to work. On the contrary, our case company is more likely to extend the encouragement of 'just be yourself' to '*becoming* yourself'. By being an educational organization with a focus on continuous personal growth aiming for reinventing education, the company proclaims and represents that learning is a lifelong process. This leads to the perception that one continually needs to work on *becoming* better in all areas of life. Consequently,

this result contributes to the critical management studies with a more nuanced view on employee authenticity.

Our third contribution is related to culture management practices and autonomy. Peters and Waterman (1982) argue that companies with strong cultures give organizational members control over their destinies in the form of autonomy. In our case study, the company claims to provide its employees with different sorts of freedom, including the freedom to control their own destinies and the paths for development. However, we identified that a 'lifestyle-package' is offered to employees through the concepts of personal growth. The paradox is that the company aims to educate employees to be critical thinkers yet only within the given organizational frameworks and concepts. This insight reflects that employees in our case study tend to adopt a particular way of thinking, behaving, feeling and living, which is provided by the company in the form of a mindset and 'lifestyle-package'. Resulting from that, we argue that the freedom of autonomy in our case company is not given as described by Peters and Waterman (1982), but it is a somewhat limited form of freedom aligned to company boundaries. Although the organization claims to ensure freedom and awareness of choices, reflections, and critical thinking of employees in the form of questioning, this is possible only within a set organizational framework. It is important to emphasize that this insight is in line with critical management studies and is not intended to criticize organizational processes or practices but to help establish a dialogue that allows a more nuanced critical thinking.

6.2 Limitations and further research suggestions

The researchers acknowledge the limitations of acquired empirical material within the timeframe given through the means of one organizational example. Because of the growing popularity of expertise in innovative, rapidly changing, and independent nature of work, we propose to examine control mechanisms in organizations with strong organizational cultures and similar knowledge-intensive work t across various industries. While the number of organizations with such a strong focus on educational goals may be limited, there might be a particular interest to study organizations that offer their employees a specific lifestyle, ensured by alignment with a company's mission and purpose. The idea of influencing employees' lives beyond organizational boundaries was researched by Müller (2017), who identified brand-centric control and its implications. Our study further

suggests examining the impact of control mechanisms not just through corporate branding but rather through given corporate mission statements and higher purposes.

Also, we suggest adopting the ethnographic approach allowing the study of a phenomenon over a more extended period of time with a broader and deeper scope of empirical data. Interestingly, we consider the location and national culture as a less relevant criterion for future research. This assumption is made based on the observation that innovative and diverse organizations tend to build strong and unique cultures in which otherwise accepted socially-regulated norms might find less appliance.

Finally, we suggest conducting further research not only with the current organizational members in such organizations but also with the former employees. This approach could provide better insights and other perspectives on employee 'mismatches' as well as could facilitate understanding effects of neo-normative control outside of the organizational boundaries.

6.3   Practical implications

Taking into account the findings and the discussion part of our study, we would further like to highlight the practical implications for a broader audience that our case company could illustrate. Our implications concern both external and internal effects of cultural management.

It turned out that the company has made its cultural management practices functional and performative, achieving a highly aligned and strong purpose-driven culture. Although this kind of organizational culture found adherents and support of like-minded people, we suggest that practitioners should pay attention to normative control practices creating unvaried organizational cultures. Taking into account that normalized practices are often taken for granted, we can assume that employees would project the same norms through their communication with external audiences (e.g., customers). The external audience that does not share the same norms might find these interactions incomprehensible, and therefore, they can be susceptible to resistance. By resisting this sort of communication, external audiences can also defy the meaning of this communication, even though it might hold some value for them. One of the examples in our case might be the company language used for describing its own products and addressing the ideas through public channels. The

way of speaking can be normalized and accepted among the employees, but it might be quite ambiguous for understanding by any external audience.

The second implication considers the organization internally. When forming such a strong integration between work and private life, it is crucial to adopt reflexive approaches and thinking. Reflexivity should be practiced not only within the frameworks that favor ideas of the organization but exploring different or opposing perspectives in order to make more informed choices.

REFERENCE LIST

Ahearne, J. (2009). Cultural Policy Explicit and Implicit: A distinction and some uses, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp.141–153

Alvesson, M. (1985). On focus in cultural studies of organizations, *Scandinavian Journal of Management Studies,* vol. 2, no.2, pp.105-20

Alvesson, M. (1985). On focus in cultural studies of organizations, *Scandinavian Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 2, no.2, pp.105-20

Alvesson, M. (2000). Social Identity and the Problem of Loyalty in Knowledge-Intensive Companies, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 37, no. 8, pp.1101-1123

Alvesson, M. (2004). Knowledge Work and Knowledge-Intensive Firms, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press

Alvesson, M. (2013). Understanding Organizational Culture, 2nd edn, Los Angeles: SAGE

Alvesson, M. & Berg, P. O. (1992). Corporate Culture and Organizational Symbolism: An overview, Berlin; New York: W. de Gruyter

Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2000). Varieties of Discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis, *Human Relations*, vol. 53, no. 9, pp.1125–1149

Alvesson, M. & Robertson, M. (2006). The Best and the Brightest: The construction, significance and effects of elite identities in consulting firms, *Organizations*, vol.13, no. 2, pp.195 - 224

Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K. (2017). Reflexive Methodology: New vistas for qualitative research, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

Alvesson, M. & Sveningsson, S. (2016). Changing Organizational Culture: cultural change work in progress, 2nd edn, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge

Alvesson, M. & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity Regulation as Organizational Control: Producing the appropriate individual, *Journal of Management Studies,* vol. 39, no. 5, pp.619-644

Alvesson, M. & Willmott, H. (2011). Critical Management Studies, London: SAGE

Alvesson, M., Blom, M. & Sveningsson, S. (2017). Reflexive Leadership: Organizing in an imperfect world, Los Angeles: London: SAGE

Amabile, T. M. & Kramer, S. J. (2011). The Progress Principle: using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work, Boston: Harvard Business Review Press

Barley, S. & Kunda, G. (1992). Design and Devotion: Surges of rational and normative ideologies of control in managerial discourse, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp.363–399

Bloom, P. (2016). Work as the Contemporary Limit of Life: Capitalism, the death drive, and the lethal fantasy of 'work-life balance', *Organization*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 588–606

Bloom, P. & Cederström, C. (2009). The Sky's the Limit: Fantasy in the age of market rationality, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp.159–180

Bramming, P., Kristensen, A. R. & Pedersen, M. (2010). Enjoy Yourself! – Self-management, productivity and well-being, in Egos Conference, Lisbon, pp. 1–14

Brannan, M. J., Parsons, E. & Priola, V. (2011). Branded Lives: The production and consumption of meaning at work, Cheltenham, Glos, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar

Brink, H. I. L. (1993). Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research, *Curationis*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp.35-38

Bushe, G. R. (2010). Clear Leadership: Sustaining real collaboration and partnership at work, rev. edn, Boston: Davies-Black

Buzan, T. & Buzan, B. (2006). The Mind Map Book, Harlow: BBC Active

Carver, C. S. & Scheier, M. F. (2002). Control Processes and Self-organization as Complementary Principles Underlying Behaviour, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp.304–315

Casey, C. (1995). Work, self and society. After industrialism, London, UK: Routledge

Cederström, C. (2011). Fit for Everything: Health and the ideology of authenticity, *Ephemera Articles*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp.27–45

Cederström, C. & Spicer, A. (2015). The Wellness Syndrome, Malden, MA: Polity Press

Corden, A. & Sainsbury, R. (2006). Using verbatim quotations in reporting qualitative social research, York: University of York

Costas, J. & Fleming, P. (2009). Beyond Dis-identification: A discursive approach to self-alienation in contemporary organizations, *Human Relations*, vol. 62, no. 3, pp.353–378

Costas, J. & Kärreman, D. (2015). The bored self in knowledge work, *Human Relations*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp.61-83

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research Design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, 4th end, international student edn, Los Angeles: SAGE

Crosby, P. (1984). Quality Without Tears: The art of hassle-free management, New York: McGraw-Hill

Crotty, M. (1998). The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and perspective in the research process, London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications

Davis, S. M. (1984). Managing Corporate Culture, Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger

Deal, T. & Kennedy, A. (1982). Corporate Cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Du Gay, P. & Salaman, G. (1992). The Cult[ure] of The Customer, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 29, no. 5, pp.615–633

Dubois, A. & Gadde L. E. (2002). Systematic Combining: an abductive approach to case research, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 55, no.7, pp. 553 – 560

En.wikipedia.org. (2019). Personal development. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_development [Accessed 22 May 2019]

Eriksson, P. & Kovalainen, A. (2008). Qualitative Methods in Business Research, Los Angeles: SAGE

Etzioni, A. (1975). A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations, New York: Free Press

Fleming, P. & Spicer, A. (2003). Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity and resistance. *Organization*, vol. 10, no.1, pp.157–179

Fleming, P. & Sturdy, A. (2009). Just be yourself: Towards neo-normative control in organizations, *Employee Relations,* vol. 31, no. 6, pp.569-583

Fleming, P. & Sturdy, A. (2011). 'Being Yourself' in the Electronic Sweatshop: New forms of normative control, *Human Relations*, vol. 64, no. 2, pp.177-200

Foster, R. & Kaplan, S. (2001). Creative Destruction: Why companies that are built to last underperform the market – and how to successfully transform them, New York: Currency

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and Power, in H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*, Brighton, UK: Harvester, pp.208-226

Freire, P. (1972). The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Frost, P. J. (ed.). (1985). Organizational Culture, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications

Gabriel, Y. (1999), Beyond happy families: a critical re-evaluation of the control-resistance-identity triangle, *Human Relations,* vol. 52, no. 2, pp.179-203

Gagliardi, P. (ed.). (1990). Symbols and Artifacts: View of the corporate landscape, New York: de Gruyter

Geertz, C. (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays, New York: Basic Books

Glynn, M., Giorgi, S. and Lockwood, C. (2013). Organization Culture, Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets

Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research, *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 597-606

Grant, D. & Hardy, C. (2004). Introduction: Struggles with organizational discourse, *Organization Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp.5–13

Gregory, I. (2003). Ethics in Research, London: Continuum

Gubrium, J. F. & Holstein, J. A. (1997). The New Language of Qualitative Method, New York: Oxford University Press

Hagel, J., Schwartz, J. & Bersin, J. (2017). Navigating the future of work: Can we point business, workers, and social institutions in the same direction? *Deloitte Review,* vol. 21, pp. 27-45

Hair, J. F. (2007). Research methods for business, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, West Sussex, England

Harvey, D. (1989). The Condition of Postmodernity, Oxford: Blackwell

Hatch, M. J. (2018). Organization Theory: Modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives, 4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hislop, D., Helms, R. & Bosua, R. (2018). Knowledge Management in Organizations: A critical introduction, 4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Houlihan, M. (2002). Tensions and variations in call center strategies, *Human Resource Management Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp.67–85

Hox, J. J. & Boeije, H. R. (2005). Data Collection: Primary vs. secondary, *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*, vol. 1, pp.593-599

Jermier, J., Slocum, J., Fry, L. & Gaines, J. (1991). Organizational Subcultures in a Soft Bureaucracy: Resistance behind the myth and facade of an official culture, *Organization Science*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp.170-194

Kanter, M. (1984). The Change Masters, London: Allen&Unwin

Kanter, M. (1990). When Giants Learn to Dance, London: Unwin Hyman

Knights, D. & Willmott, H. (1987). Organizational Culture as Management Strategy: A Critique and illustration from the financial services industry, International Studies of Management & Organization, vol. 17, no. 3, pp.40-63

Kunda, G. (1992). Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press

Kunda, G. (2006). Engineering Culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation, rev. edn, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press

Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2015). InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing, 3rd edn, Los Angeles: Sage Publications

LeCompte, M. D., & Goetz, J. P. (1982). Problems of Reliability and Validity in Ethnographic Research, *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 52, pp.31-60

Lewis, S. (2003) The Integration of Paid Work and the Rest of Life: Is post-industrial work the new leisure? *Leisure Studies,* vol. 22, no. 4, pp.343–345

Liu, A. (2004) The Laws of Cool Knowledge: Knowledge work and the culture of information, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Longino, H. E. (1990). Science as Social Knowledge: Values and objectivity in scientific inquiry, Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press

Luscher, L. S., Lewis, M. & Ingram, A. (2006). The Social Construction of Organizational Change Paradoxes, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp.491–502.

Malone, T. W. (2007). The future of work: How the new order of business will shape your organization, your management style, and your life, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press

Marshak, R. J. & Grant, D. (2008). Organizational Discourse and New Organization Development Practices, British Journal of Management, vol. 19, pp.7-19

Martin, J. (2002). Organizational Culture: Mapping the Terrain, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

Maslow, A. H. (1999). *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Hoboken: J. Wiley & Sons.

Mason, J. (2002). Qualitative researching, Los Angeles: Sage

Maxwell, J. A. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research, *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 62, no.3, pp.279-300

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M. & Saldana, J. (2014). Qualitative Data Analysis: A methods sourcebook, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc

Mishler, E. G. (1990). Validation in inquiry-guided research: The role of exemplars in narrative studies, *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 415-442

Müller, M. (2017). Brand-Centred Control: A Study of Internal Branding and Normative Control, *Organization Studies*, vol. 38, no. 7, pp.895–915

Ogbonna, E. & Wilkinson, B. (2003). The False Promise of Organizational Culture Change: A case study of middle managers in grocery retailing, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 20, no. 5, pp.1151-1178

Oliver, P. (2003). The Student's Guide to Research Ethics, Maidenhead: Open University Press

Orwell, G. (1989). Nineteen Eighty-Four, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Ostroff, C., Kinicki, A. J. & Muhammad, R. S. (2003). Organizational Culture & Climate, in W. C. Borman, D. R. Ilgen, R. J. Klimoski, & I. B. Weiner (eds), *Handbook of Psychology, Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 12, New York: Wiley, pp.643–676

Ouchi, W. G. (1979). A Conceptual Framework for The Design of Organizational Control Mechanism, *Management Science*, vol. 27, no. 9, pp.833-848

Ouchi, W. G. (1980). Markets, Bureaucracies, and Clans, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp.129 - 141

Ouchi, W. G. & Maguire, M. (1975). Organizational Control: Two functions, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp.559-569

Ouchi, W. G. (1981). Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge, New York: Addison-Wesley

Pedersen, M. (2011). A career is nothing without a personal life: On the social machine in the call for authentic employees, *Ephemera Articles*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp.63-77

Peters, T. J. & Waterman, R. H. (1982). In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's best-run companies, New York: Harper & Row

Plester, B. A. & Sayers, J. (2007). 'Taking the Piss': Functions of banter in the IT industry, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 20, no.2, pp.157–187

Prasad, P. (2017). Crafting Qualitative Research: Beyond positivist traditions, 2nd edn, New York, NY: Routledge

Ray, C. (1986). Corporate Culture: The last frontier of control? *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 23, pp.287 - 297

Rennstam, J. & Wästerfors, D. (2018). Analyze! Crafting Your Data in Qualitative Research, Lund: Studentlitteratur

Rosen, M. (1985). Breakfast at Spiro's Dramaturgy and Dominance, J*ournal of Management* vol. 11, pp.31-48

Ross, A. (2004), No-Collar: The humane workplace and its hidden costs, Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Saffold, G. S. (1988). Culture Traits, Strength, and Organizational Performance: Moving beyond 'strong' culture, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp.546–558

Saunders, M. N. K, Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2016). Research Methods for Business Students, 7th edn, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited

Schein, E. H. (1985). Organizational Culture and Leadership, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Schein, E. H. (2010). Organizational Culture and Leadership, 4th edn, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Schultz, M. (1995). On Studying Organizational Cultures: Diagnosis and understanding, BerlinWill; New York: W. de Gruyter

Searle, J. R. (1995). The Construction of Social Reality, New York: Free Press

Shaw, I. (2008). Ethics and the Practice of Qualitative Research: Qualitative social work, *Research and Practice*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp.400-414

Shuck, B., & Wollard, K. (2009). Employee Engagement and HRD: A seminal review of the foundations, *Human Resource Development Review,* vol. 9, no. 1, pp.89-110

Silverman, D. (2000), Doing qualitative research: a practical handbook, London: Sage

Spicer, A. (2011). Guilty lives: The authenticity trap at work, *Ephemera Articles*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp.46-62

Spicer, A., Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2009). Critical Performativity: The unfinished business of critical management studies, *Human Relations*, vol. 62, no. 4, pp.537–560

Styhre, A. (2013). How to Write Academic Texts: A practical guide, Lund: Studentlitteratur

Suthers, D., Lund, K., Rosé, C., Teplovs, C. and Law, N. (2013). Productive Multivocality in the Analysis of Group Interactions, Springer US

Swedberg, R. (2012). Theorizing in Sociology and Social Science: Turning to the context of discovery, *Theory and Society*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp.1–40

Tannenbaum, G. (1968). Control in Organizations, New York: McGraw Hill

Thompson, P. & McHugh, D. (1990). Work Organizations, London: Macmillan

Thurlow, A. & Mills, J. H. (2009). Change, talk and sensemaking, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp.459-479

Tracy, S.J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research, *Qualitative inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 10, pp. 873-851

Trice, H. M. & Beyer, J. M. (1993). The Cultures of Work Organizations, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall

Turner, B. (ed.). (1989). Organizational Symbolism. New York: de Gruyter.

Vallas, S. (2003). The adventures of managerial hegemony: Team work, ideology and worker resistance, *Social Problems*, vol.50, no. 2, pp.204–225

Walker, A. (2011). Creativity Loves Constraints: The paradox of Google's twenty percent time, *Ephemera Articles*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp.369–386

Waterman, R. H. (1988). The Renewal Factor, New York: Bantam Books

Weick, K. E. (2005). The experience of theorizing: Sensemaking as topic and resource, in K.G Smith. & M. Hitt, 4th edn, *Great minds in management: The process of theory development*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 394-413

Whyte, W. H. (1956). The Organizational Man, New York: Doubleday

Williams, C. (2013). Effective Management, 6th edn, South-Western College Pub

Willmott, H. (1990). Subjectivity and the dialectics of praxis, in D. Knights & H. Willmott (eds), Labour Process Theory, London: Macmillan, pp.336-378

Willmott, H. (1993). Strength Is Ignorance; Slavery Is Freedom: Managing culture in modern Organizations, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp.515–552

Yin, R. K. (2003). Case Study Research: Design and methods, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications

Appendix 1: Interview questions guideline

I Background and context (aim: identify relevant experience and context):

1. Please introduce yourself shortly
   (what is your area of work at Brainwell, for what type organizations did you work before, how long have you been with Brainwell?)

2. How did you get to know about Brainwell and why did you want to work there?

II Recruitment and reasons to join, alignment, expectations (aim: identify employees view prior joining the company, trigger their reflection about possible change in their experiences):

3. Why do you think Brainwell had selected you?

4. What expectations did you have towards the company?

5. Could you describe how was your start at Brainwell *(onboarding, first impressions)*

6. What is 'personal growth' / 'personal development' for you? (*meaning and what do they actually did / do for personal growth*)

7. What goals for personal growth did you have before joining Brainwell?
   a. Have they changed once you started working here?
   b. How did Brainwell support you in achieving them?

III Organizational culture (aim: identify employees experiences from Brainwell culture and possible influence on employees', their lifestyle and their perceptions):

8. Could you describe Brainwell's culture in a couple of words? (*follow-up questions: perceptions, examples of practices, their opinion about it and etc.*)

9. What do you think makes Brainwell different from other companies practicing employee development and caring about their well-being? (what is something unique for you in the company)

10. How have you progressed in your career since joining Brainwell and how has Brainwell helped you in this process?

11. How important is your work in Brainwell? (*if meaningful, then in what way?*)

12. If we asked a friend of yours how you might have changed after joining Brainwell, what would they probably answer?

13. How do you see your future with Brainwell?

Appendix 2: Brainwell values

(Source: company website)

1. I dare to dream big
2. I evolve through learning
3. I am positive & passionate
4. I practice transparency & candor
5. I help others rock their greatest lives
6. I turn customers into raving fans
7. I am grateful and I celebrate life
8. I kick serious ass
9. I am a money magnet
10. I honour my words with action